RUTH FIELDING IN ALASKA

ALICE B. EMERSON

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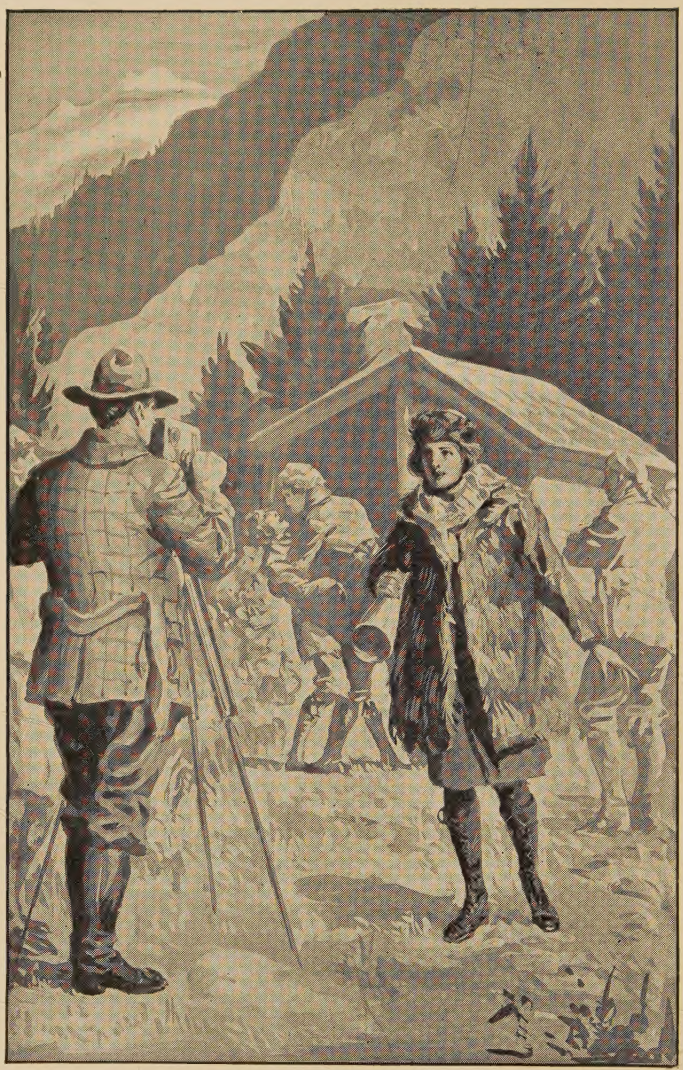

"READY? GO!" AND THE CAMERAS CLICKED.

"Ruth Fielding in Alaska." *Page* 147

Ruth Fielding in Alaska

OR

THE GIRL MINERS OF SNOW MOUNTAIN

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL," "RUTH FIELDING AT GOLDEN PASS," "BETTY GORDON SERIES," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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RUTH FIELDING IN ALASKA

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RUTH FIELDING IN ALASKA

CHAPTER I

THE THREAT

"THE contents of the missive appear to worry you, Ruth, my love. If that scowl should freeze on your face, your beauty would be marred forever."

Stretched full length on the grass beneath a tree whose branches spread a grateful shade, Helen Cameron regarded her friend with an amused and interested smile. As the latter appeared not to notice her sally, she tried again.

"Can't you tell me what dreadful news the letter contains?"

Ruth Fielding thus questioned, looked up slowly and sighed. She gestured with the hand that held her letter.

"It's from that horrid Bloomberg, Helen," she said.

"Sol Bloomberg!" Immediately interested, Helen sat up with a jerk and hugged her knees, gazing expectantly at her chum. "Don't tell me

he, too, has fallen a victim to your charms, Ruthie Fielding!"

"Don't be silly." Ruth spoke in a vague, preoccupied voice. "As a matter of fact," she added ruefully, "I imagine whatever feeling Sol Bloomberg has for me is far from a tender one."

"Then, what on earth is he writing to you about?" Helen was genuinely curious. "You aren't thinking of entering into a business deal with him, are you?"

Ruth chuckled.

"That deduction is even more absurd than the first one, Helen Cameron. The mere idea of doing business with——"

"That hard-boiled cheat?" suggested Helen amiably.

"Such language! Nevertheless, Sol Bloomberg is all of that——"

"And then some!" murmured Helen irrepressibly.

"Do you know what he says in this letter?"

"I've been trying for some time to find out."

"He threatens me!" Ruth, sitting cross-legged on the ground, waved the offending letter for further emphasis. "He actually has the nerve to threaten me!"

"So you said before."

"Well, if you are going to be tiresome——"

"I'm not, Ruthie darling. Honest, I'm not.

I'm only furiously interested. What is our old friend Sol threatening you for?"

"Spite mostly, I suppose," returned Ruth, relapsing once more into her thoughtful mood. "He wants to frighten me and spoil my pleasure in the new picture that we filmed at Golden Pass."

"I hear he has been practically run out of the pictures," observed Helen, absently chewing on a bit of grass.

Ruth nodded.

"And of course he blames that all on me."

"But how can he?" Helen swept back her pretty hair in a puzzled gesture. "Surely all his troubles have been caused by his own cheating and double-dealing."

"Of course they have," Ruth agreed. "It was Bloomberg, you remember, who lured Viola Callahan away from the lead in my picture when he knew to do such a thing at that time would almost certainly ruin the whole thing——"

"And you fooled him by taking the lead yourself and making a better leading lady than Viola Callahan ever could," chuckled Helen.

Ruth tried to bow, which in her cross-legged position was rather a hard thing to do. Then she frowned and fell silent while she reviewed the details of her quarrel with Bloomberg.

It all began when she engaged Layton Boardman, an ex-star of Bloomberg's, to play the lead

in her new Western picture. Though Bloomberg and Boardman had quarreled, Bloomberg really wanted to renew the actor's contract, though at a salary that no actor of Boardman's reputation would care to accept.

When the Fielding Film Company signed up Bloomberg's ex-star at a good salary, the producer was furious. In retaliation he later tempted Viola Callahan, Ruth's leading lady, to come over to him at a time when Miss Callahan's desertion would almost certainly ruin Ruth's picture.

The fact that Ruth's picture was not ruined and to avert the catastrophe she had taken the lead herself—and successfully—had only served to increase Bloomberg's dislike of her.

Bloomberg's own picture, featuring Viola Callahan, was a failure. This, coupled with the unsavory story of his treachery to the Fielding Film Company, Ruth's producing company, served to ruin what shreds of fortune and reputation he had and practically forced him out of the producing end of the business.

Ruth supposed, ruefully, that Bloomberg blamed all his misfortunes upon her because she had dared to sign up Layton Boardman when the latter was not under contract to Bloomberg or any one else and was absolutely free to accept any offer that was made him.

"I observed," drawled Helen, after a con-

siderable silence, "that you made a love of a leading lady, Ruthie."

"Thanks, whether I deserve the compliment or not!" was Ruth's laughing reply to Helen's remark. "Anyway, the fact remains that despite all Bloomberg's crooked schemes and double-crossing we managed to triumph in the end, while he——"

"Broke his professional neck," finished Helen. "I wish it had been his real one!" she added, with a fierce look that brought a laugh from Ruth.

"You are getting quite bloodthirsty, Helen Cameron," she said. "But at the risk of appearing bloodthirsty myself, I don't mind saying that I wish that something not too dreadful would befall our rascally friend; enough, at any rate, to remove him gently from my life at present. I have quite enough problems to face without worrying about Sol Bloomberg!"

"Don't let it bother you, honey," said Helen, stretching out lazily again upon the soft grass. "Just how does he threaten you?" she added, with a gesture toward the crumpled letter in Ruth's hand.

"He says he may bring suit against me," Ruth replied.

"Humph! For what?" Helen retorted. "If anybody ought to bring suit, it's you, Ruthie. The man must be crazy."

"I believe he is—with fury," said Ruth thoughtfully. "It's natural for a man down and out, as Bloomberg is, to rail at the successful, and in this case he chooses me to vent his spite on."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't lie awake nights worrying about him," counseled Helen. "What could a failure like Bloomberg do to you whose reputation is so well established?"

"I don't know," said Ruth, playing absently with the letter. "But this much I can see. I have made a bitter, vindictive enemy of this man, and I feel that he will leave no stone unturned to do me an injury. Anyway," she added, in a lighter tone, "I don't intend to worry until I have something more substantial to go on than this letter. It would be a shame to spoil a day like this—and our ride."

"Looks as if we weren't going to get a ride," grumbled Helen. She propped herself up on one elbow and scanned the dusty road that wound along near the Red Mill. "We appear to be forgotten, Ruth Fielding. Jilted!"

"Not as bad as that, I guess," laughed Ruth. "It really is barely time for the boys, you know."

Tom Cameron, Helen's twin brother, and Chess Copley, Helen's fiancé, had suggested an auto ride to the two girls. Since the day was sultry and hot, the girls had readily accepted the invitation.

Helen had lunched with Ruth, and now the chums had repaired to the shaded grounds about the old house to await the arrival of the boys.

Ruth had decided to peruse her morning mail, and among the letters had found the annoying one from Sol Bloomberg.

The letter reminded the girls forcibly of Ruth's last venture in motion picture-making in which the latter had forced her way to success despite the machinations of this same Bloomberg, and in so doing had made of the unsuccessful producer a bitter and revengeful enemy.

Now she tore the paper into tiny bits and with a challenging little flirt of her fingers scattered the pieces to the four winds. This accomplished, Ruth felt better, as though, in the act of tearing up the letter, she had destroyed the potency of Bloomberg's threat as well.

But Sol Bloomberg was not a scrap of paper to be so easily disposed of. His enmity was something to be reckoned with, as Ruth was to learn full well and to her cost in the days to follow.

But now, as Helen called out that the boys were coming, Ruth put all premonition of trouble from her mind. For that afternoon at least, she was determined to leave "shop" behind her.

Tom Cameron had no sooner stepped from the car than she saw there was some news of an im-

portant nature for her. He came to her directly and held out a yellow envelope.

"Telegram," he said laconically. "They were just sending it out from the office when I came along and thought I'd save them the trouble."

"Thanks, Tom," and then with a whimsical glance at Helen: "I wonder if this is another message from Bloomberg!"

The others stood by with interest while Ruth tore open the yellow envelope. There were so many changes and surprises in the life of this talented girl, who combined in one person director, author and screen actress, that her friends were kept continually agog with interest.

Ruth's eyes ran hastily through the message. She gave a little cry of amazement and thrust the telegram toward Tom.

"It's from Mr. Hammond," she said in explanation to Chess Copley and Helen. "He is in business difficulties of some sort——"

"And he wants you to come to New York at once!" ejaculated Tom, looking up from the telegram. "Now, Ruth Fielding, what do you intend to do about that?"

CHAPTER II

ALL BUSINESS

RUTH FIELDING sank to the grass and stared at the others, her forehead wrinkling in a puzzled frown.

"I don't know," she said, in response to Tom's question. "There are really a hundred things I ought to do right here——"

"Oh, there always are, Ruthie," broke in Helen flippantly. "You are so busy all the time it makes me weary just to see you work. Why turn down a perfectly exciting trip to New York—especially when duty calls you?"

"Do you really think it is my duty to go, Tom?" Ruth's eyes appealed to Helen's twin brother as he stood thoughtfully reading over the telegram. Tom was Ruth's business partner in the Fielding Film Company, and since the young fellow claimed a strictly personal interest in her as well, the girl had formed the habit of consulting him in all things.

"I suppose you ought, really," replied Tom.

"Mr. Hammond has been a very good friend of yours—of ours—Ruth, and I don't see how in the world you can ignore an appeal like this."

"You see!" cried Helen triumphantly. "I knew he'd agree with me! That's what twin brothers are for!"

"Just what does Mr. Hammond have to say about his financial embarrassments?" asked Chess Copley. "Does he go into any details?"

"He can't very well in a telegram," Ruth replied. "Here," taking the telegram from Tom and handing it over to Chess, "read for yourself and form your own conclusions."

This was the message Helen and Chess read together.

"Am in great difficulties concerning production of Girl of Gold. Can you come to New York immediately? Unable to leave city.

"J. A. HAMMOND."

"The Girl of Gold," Tom was ruminating aloud. "Wasn't that the Western picture there was such keen competition over?"

"Yes," returned Ruth eagerly. "The script was taken from the novel, you know, that made such a tremendous hit."

"And the scenes were laid in the gold fields of Alaska," Helen added as her contribution. "I

remember the book. It certainly was a thriller."

"The picture ought to be just as good," said Ruth thoughtfully. "I know Mr. Hammond hoped great things from it."

"I wonder what the difficulties are he speaks about," said Tom.

Ruth shook her head.

"That we can only find out by a personal interview," she said. "But one thing I do know—that whatever his trouble is, it must be pretty bad or he would never have sent this hurried call to me. What shall I do, Tom?"

"I know what you'll do," said Helen, with decision. "You will pack your things and take the next train to New York. I know Ruth Fielding," with a fond little squeeze of Ruth's hand, "and my experience of her is, that she never deserts a friend in distress. How about it, Tommy-boy?"

Since Helen was one of the very first friends Ruth Fielding had ever had, her prophecy of Ruth's future action in regard to Mr. Hammond was apt to prove a fairly accurate one. For since Ruth, a little girl of twelve and an orphan, came to the house at the Red Mill to live with her Uncle Jabez Potter and his sweet-tempered housekeeper, Aunt Alvirah Boggs, Ruth Fielding and Helen Cameron had been the warmest and closest of friends.

In point of fact, Tom was probably Ruth's old-

est friend, since she had met him first and through him, his twin sister, Helen.

The Red Mill was situated just outside the town of Cheslow. About a mile away in a handsome big house Helen and Tom Cameron lived with their father, who was a widower and wealthy. In the first volume of the series, entitled "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill," is narrated the meeting of these young people and their subsequent adventures.

Uncle Jabez Potter was something of a miser and a crabbed old soul to boot. However, when Ruth contrived to save the old man a considerable amount of money, his heart relented to the extent of permitting Ruth to enter boarding school with Helen Cameron. Looking backward, Ruth always felt that all her good times and adventures dated from those good old days at Briarwood.

At school and college Ruth's friends were numerous, but none were ever quite as dear to her as Helen. While still engaged in school work, Ruth developed her talent for scenario writing, and from that small beginning commenced the steady climb that was to lead eventually to her present success.

Ruth's school and college friends, interested in the triumphs of their schoolmate and basking in reflected glory, continued to keep in touch with her even after the close association of school days

was at an end. A group of them had come on to Cheslow to be present at the opening night of "Snowblind," one of Ruth's recent pictures, which had proved a tremendous success.

It was Mr. Hammond, owner and director of the Alectrion Film Corporation, who had first given Ruth her chance and who had never afterward failed in kind encouragement and backing. Even when Ruth, realizing that she had unusual gifts not only in scenario writing but in directing as well, decided to break away from Mr. Hammond and organize her own company, the latter had backed her project whole-heartedly, evincing only sympathy and an inspiring belief in her ability.

Small wonder then that, upon receipt of this telegram from her old friend telling of his difficulties and soliciting her aid, Ruth found it practically impossible to refuse him.

In the volume directly preceding this, entitled, "Ruth Fielding at Golden Pass," it was Mr. Hammond himself who had suggested that Ruth take the lead when her leading lady, at the instigation of Bloomberg, deserted the company at the last minute.

So now her question to Tom, asking for his advice, was more a matter of form than anything else. Since the latter had secretly invested a considerable amount of money in her new and strug-

gling little business just when she was most desperately in need of help, gratitude had been added to an already warm feeling for Helen's twin brother.

There had been an understanding between these two young people for some time. For Tom's sturdy liking for the girl from the Red Mill had developed into something more ardent as Ruth grew to womanhood. But as Ruth grew, her ambition grew also. The temptation to determine just how far her talent would carry her in the motion picture business was too great for Ruth to resist. So while returning Tom's affection, the girl put him off time and time again, pleading her career as an excuse.

Tom was very patient. He could appreciate Ruth's enthusiasm, since he himself had become so vitally interested in pictures. He had as well, a sincere regard for the girl's ability.

However, waiting is often very hard, and time and again it was only Ruth's appreciation of his patience and forbearance that kept Tom from open revolt.

So now it was just another example of this same patience and forbearance when, in reply to Ruth's question concerning Mr. Hammond, he said without hesitation:

"Of course you'll have to go, Ruth. Under the circumstances you couldn't do anything else."

Ruth gave him a grateful glance.

"But you will go, too, Tommy-boy? As my business partner I demand that you accompany me!"

Tom grinned.

"You don't need to demand," he assured her. "I was going anyway."

"And I'll be your chaperon, Ruthie," said Helen amiably. "I'm quite sure you need one."

Ruth chuckled.

"I don't know whether to take that as an insult or not," she said. "However, I'd love to have you come along if you care to."

So Ruth decided that she would send an answering telegram to Mr. Hammond, saying that she would pack that night and start early the following morning for New York.

Little did Ruth dream as she made the decision what that trip was destined to bring forth.

CHAPTER III

BREAKERS AHEAD

"It looks bad, Jim! Bad! Anyway you figure it, the result is the same. A financial smash and the sort of failure that doesn't do your reputation any good in the motion picture business!"

Mr. Hammond was seated in the offices of the Alectrion Film Corporation in conclave with one of his close business associates, James McCarty.

The latter was a jolly red-faced Irishman with an habitual smile wreathing his wide, good-humored mouth. Just now the smile was not in evidence, in consequence of which James McCarty bore a rather close resemblance to a sorrowing kewpie.

Mr. Hammond's own usually cheerful ruddy countenance was grave and he puffed absently at his cigar, now and then beating a nervous tattoo with his fingers on the edge of his desk. Even without the confirmation of his words it could be seen that the head of the Alectrion Film Corporation was in a state of extreme agitation.

"Anyway you figure it the thing looks bad," he repeated unhappily.

"Wish I could disagree with you," said McCarty, with a rueful shake of his head. "But I can't and still keep my reputation for tellin' the truth. You've had a streak of bad luck that's uncanny, that's what I call it."

"And I'd call it something worse than that," retorted Mr. Hammond grimly. "There's the best director I ever had deserting me just at the most critical time and going over to the enemy. I tell you, I'd have thought twice about sinking so much cash in 'The Girl of Gold' if I hadn't depended on Baxter to put it across strong."

"Davidson would have been your next best bet," said McCarty mournfully, with a hard pull at his cigar. "I've often said he was pretty near as good as Baxter."

"Yes, and what does he do just at this time?" demanded Mr. Hammond bitterly. "Goes and gets typhoid fever, which puts him out of the picture—literally—for months to come——"

"And you under contract to produce 'The Girl of Gold' in six months," finished McCarty.

"Aren't you the fine old comforter!" said Mr. Hammond, a touch of humor playing about the grim lines of his mouth. "You might just as well pronounce a death sentence over my forty thousand dollars."

"Well, it isn't my fault," McCarty pointed out, reasonably enough. "I'm just contributing my little share to the gloomin' party you started yourself." For a moment his grin flashed out, making him look less like a mournful kewpie. His face sobered almost immediately, however, as he added: "Anyway, I'm not sayin' a thing but the truth."

"Don't I know it!" retorted Mr. Hammond, the lines of worry furrowed deep in his face. "If only I could have kept Gordon we might have inched through some way, though he isn't nearly as competent as the other two. But now that he's starting for Europe——"

"You couldn't blame him though," McCarty broke in. "It's his father that's dying and you couldn't have much respect for the lad if he didn't rush to the old man's side."

"Who's blaming him?" retorted Mr. Hammond irritably. "Have I said a word against him? The only one who is really to blame," he added with a grim tightening of his mouth, "is that man Baxter. And some day I'm going to have the extreme satisfaction of telling him what I think of him!"

There was a short pause while both men thought uncomfortably of the gloomy future.

Suddenly Mr. Hammond looked up, and there was a new note in his voice as he said quietly:

"Jim, there's just one little twinkling light in all the gloom."

McCarty gazed at him with interest.

"And would you mind tellin' me what that is?" he requested.

Mr. Hammond leaned across the desk, his steady gaze holding McCarty's.

"Jim, I think there is one person who can pull our fat out of the fire—if she will!"

"'She'?" repeated McCarty, bewildered. "And now who have you in mind?"

"Miss Fielding," the other replied quietly. "If I could get her to direct this picture—I feel sure she could do it with credit to every one concerned!"

McCarty considered and gradually his expression became less mournful. A ray of hope shone through his clouds of depression. Suddenly he leaned forward, bringing his big fist down on the table with a decisive thump.

"Say, I bet you've struck the right lead, old man!" he cried. "That girl can swing it if anybody can. Look at the work she has done already!"

"Tremendous!" cried Mr. Hammond, delighted at his friend's enthusiasm. "Her last pictures are going across like wild fire. She's on her way not only to fame, but wealth."

"Yeah—that's just it!" McCarty's clouds of

depression descended again, almost as black as before. "What makes you think she is going to step aside from her own business just to help us out of a jam? Don't sound reasonable. Not human nature—movin'-picture-business human nature, anyway. No, old man, wake out of your pleasant little dream. She'd never do it. Wouldn't be reasonable to ask her to."

Mr. Hammond remained thoughtfully silent for a moment or two. Then he looked at McCarty and smiled.

"I'm not so sure you're right, Jim. As you say, the motion-picture business is more or less of a cutthroat proposition—but then, so is all business, for that matter. But I believe that there are some individuals in the game who are unselfish enough to reach out a hand to a comrade in distress. I'm pretty sure—and I've known her for a long time—that Miss Fielding is one of these."

Still McCarty shook his head dubiously.

"That little lady is running too strong on her own. You'll never get her to do it, never in the wide, wide world!"

It was only a short time after this conference that another took place in the office of the Alectrion Film Corporation. Several of Mr. Hammond's associates were present, among them the dubious Mr. James McCarty.

They were all there sitting in solemn conclave when Ruth Fielding breezed in with Tom. "Breezed" was exactly the right word for the manner of her entrance, for Ruth's rosy face and bright eyes seemed to bring with them a breath of the spring day. There was one among the men who saw her at that moment who straightway made a mental note that Ruth Fielding was far too good looking to be the clever business woman they made her out to be. Good looks, in this gentleman's estimation, did not usually go with brains.

All unconscious of this estimate of herself, Ruth nodded pleasantly to those in the office she knew; then put out her hand to Mr. Hammond.

The latter greeted her cordially and the next moment grasped Tom's hand in a firm grip. The two men were great friends, yet now Mr. Hammond did not disguise from himself that it was Tom's negative that he really feared to this proposition he was about to put to Ruth. He knew, as most people knew who had come into intimate contact with the young people, that Tom had been very patient and had waited a long time for Ruth to "name the day." And he could not but wonder now and with a good deal of trepidation just how Tom Cameron would view a proposition that meant inevitably another postponement of his hopes. Ruth had a very genuine affection

for Tom, he felt sure, despite her devotion to her career, and his attitude would unquestionably influence her decision.

Small wonder then that the justly famous Mr. Hammond should show a trace of nervous apprehension as he introduced the two young people to his colleagues.

"Now sit down, all of you," he said with a joviality that was just a bit strained, "and I'll outline my little proposition."

"You said there was some trouble about your 'Girl of Gold,' " Ruth interpolated. "I was sorry to hear that."

"There is trouble, quite serious trouble, Miss Ruth, as you will see when I am done," said Mr. Hammond gravely. "Luck has turned her back on us completely as producers of 'The Girl of Gold,' and you," with a quick smile, "appear to be our only hope!"

Ruth leaned forward with quickened breath. Just what did he mean by that? She knew that Tom was watching her thoughtfully and felt a sudden rush of compunction. Dear old patient Tom!

But Mr. Hammond was speaking, outlining for her as he had outlined for McCarty a few days before conditions as they were at that time with the Alectrion Film Corporation.

"The whole proposition, boiled down, amounts

to this, Miss Fielding," Mr. Hammond concluded. "Because of a lack of first-class directors we are literally on the rocks, as you can see, and we are looking to you, selfishly, no doubt, to pull our fat out of the fire."

Ruth drew a long breath and leaned back. Her cheeks were burning, but her hands, clasped together in her lap, felt cold.

"Will you do it?" asked Mr. Hammond, and the other gentlemen, including the dubious McCarty, leaned forward, staring at her.

"It—it's a very great compliment you are all paying me," Ruth replied slowly. "I—I—" her voice trailed off and she looked at Tom appealingly.

Tom had been deep in thought, but now his eyes met Ruth's with an understanding smile. His nod, though almost imperceptible, seemed to raise a thousand-ton weight from the girl's heart.

She turned to Mr. Hammond, the blood flaming to her face, her little fist doubled up upon the table.

"Mr. Hammond," she cried, with the light of battle in her eye, "I'll do it!"

CHAPTER IV

THE SPY

THIS statement of Ruth's had an electric effect upon the little group of men in the office. Marcus Brun, Mr. Hammond's technical director, leaned toward the girl with a gleam of genuine admiration in his eyes.

"You'll find it anything but an easy job, Miss Fielding," he said.

"I'm not looking for an easy job," replied Ruth, turning to him quickly. "The harder they come, the better. And this—well, if I can help an old friend——" She paused and her eyes rested for a moment upon Mr. Hammond.

"It means a trip to Alaska, to the Yukon River," said McCarty. "The contract calls for that. No faked-up stuff."

"I understand—and the pictures will be taken on and around the Yukon," answered Ruth firmly.

"It's a long, hard trip."

"Many things are hard in this business, Mr. McCarty."

Mr. Hammond gazed at Ruth in intense admiration. He coughed, and cleared his throat twice before he could speak, then stretched his hand across the flat-topped desk.

"Ruth Fielding," he said, "you're square!"

It was a great moment for Ruth with all these important men of the motion-picture world paying her homage. As Tom looked at her and realized that this was Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill, the girl he had grown up with, his pride in her knew no bounds. He had a moment of wondering how he had ever found the courage to ask a girl like this to marry him and give up a profession in which she was making good so royally. It would be too bad to waste her talent; even Tom realized that.

But despite his good sportsmanship and his acknowledgment of Ruth's genius, Tom knew that this new work for Mr. Hammond that she had just pledged herself to undertake would postpone their marriage indefinitely. Despite the fact that he had tacitly given his consent, Tom was sore at heart and found it a distinct effort to join in the spirited conversation that then took place between Ruth and the members of Mr. Hammond's official staff.

" 'The Girl of Gold' is a splendid story and we ought to make it a still better photoplay," Ruth was saying enthusiastically. "I remember what

spirited bidding there was at the time you bought the right to film it, Mr. Hammond."

"The bidding was both spirited and high," said the producer ruefully. "The film rights set me back about forty thousand dollars, Miss Ruth, and it was that amount we stood to lose in case you were not in a position at this time to help us out."

"But I am," said Ruth with her quick smile. "And I feel already like the war horse that hears the bugle call! I suppose," with a glance toward Raymond Howell, the casting director, "you have an interesting cast."

"Well, we think so," responded Howell, with enthusiasm. "If you are quite willing, Miss Fielding, we were hoping to sign over Layton Boardman for the lead. His contract with you has about run out, hasn't it?"

"I should lend him to you at all events," responded Ruth, with a smile. "I was about to suggest that he was exactly the type to play Jimmy Drake."

"There is another interesting feature." Mr. Hammond leaned toward Ruth with an anticipatory smile. "You remember Edith Lang, the crippled actress?"

"Of course," cried Ruth eagerly. "Is it possible you can use her?"

"Not only possible, but certain," returned Mr.

Hammond, smiling at Ruth's enthusiasm. "She is a type made to order for the part of the crippled society woman in the play who eventually finds out that 'The Girl of Gold' is none other than her own daughter."

Ruth clapped her hands with enthusiasm.

"Fine! Fine!" she cried. "Those two alone, Boardman and Edith Lang, are strong enough to carry the play on their own shoulders."

"They won't have to," said Raymond Howell, with conviction. "When you have a chance to look over our supporting cast, Miss Fielding, I think you will agree with us that they don't come any better."

Ruth's eyes were shining. Here was an adventure after her own heart. Not only had she good actors to work with, but a fine vehicle as well. The film version of "The Girl of Gold" was practically predestined for success because of the wide popularity of the story upon which it had been based. And with her own favorite leading man in the part of Jimmy Drake, the hero of the play, and Edith Lang playing the heavy emotional rôle, it seemed that the chances of failure were so remote as to be scarcely considered.

Yet through all her exultation and excitement, Ruth felt a tiny ache of conscience when she thought of Tom. He was being such a sport about it—as indeed he had been all along. He

could have made it so hard for her to accept Mr. Hammond's proposal if he had wanted to. If he had been irritable or cranky about her work she would not have minded putting him off so much. As it was——

She stole an anxious little side glance at him and was relieved to see that he looked quite cheerful. He was speaking to Mr. Hammond and his voice was cheerful too. Ruth could not have guessed what an effort it was for Tom to make it so.

"Something has been said about almost everybody but the young lady that plays the title rôle," he was remarking with a humorous look. "Doesn't she count?"

"Not so much," answered Mr. Hammond, smiling. "Her part is not nearly so exacting as that of Boardman or Edith Lang, and we have two or three stars quite capable of meeting the requirements. We are leaving the selection to the discretion of our new director here," turning with a quizzical smile to Ruth. "I think you will all agree with me that she has an unusual knack in the selection of leading ladies!"

Ruth knew he referred to her own part in the making of her last picture when, upon the defection of her leading lady, Viola Callahan, Ruth had stepped into the lead herself.

She flushed now and looked a bit self-conscious.

"The particular leading lady you have in mind was of your selection," she reminded him, and there was a general laugh.

In fact, everything was so pleasant and jolly that it was some time before they came down to interesting and important details such as the day on which the new director was to take charge, when they were to start on location and so forth.

"You can't start work too soon to suit us, Miss Ruth," said Mr. Hammond. "I presume you are both free to begin at once?" with a glance toward Tom.

"The sooner the better," the latter replied cheerfully, and Ruth could have hugged him. That was so exactly the response she would have made.

"Well, then we might as well get down to business."

"I think we've been doing business already," remarked Ruth.

"You know what I mean, Miss Ruth. About terms——"

"I'll leave them entirely to you and Mr. Cameron," answered the girl promptly. "You know Mr. Cameron is the financial head of our concern," and Ruth gave Tom a smile that made his heart jump.

"Well, then, we'll fix that end up in the morn-

ing," said Mr. Hammond to Tom. "Now as to the trip."

Spreading a map between them on the flat-topped desk, Mr. Hammond explained the route they would take, outlining the course of their travels with a heavy blue pencil.

"Your first real stop will be at Seattle," he pointed out. "The picture must be filmed at various points along the Yukon River. I have some pictures here of various locations that may appeal to you and you can settle on some likely spots without taking the time and trouble of scouting around on your own account."

As Ruth accepted the pictures from Mr. Hammond and looked them over with Tom, she registered a mental vow that in a short time and with sufficient capital behind her, the Fielding Film Company would be run with as much efficiency as the Alectrion Film Corporation or any of the other larger producing concerns.

Take these photographs now! What an improvement that was on the haphazard system of setting out personally to hunt up locations. What a saving of time merely to have these pictures filed away where they might be brought out at a moment's notice for reference! Why, one could choose locations enough for the filming of the entire picture without actualling moving from the room! However, Ruth thought it would be

possible to stop at just one of these points along the Yukon—a small settlement, preferably—and with one such place as a base it ought to be an easy matter to discover locations in the immediate vicinity of the settlement that would satisfy the requirements of the script.

"May we take these with us?" she asked, looking up from the photographs. "Tom and I will want to look them over carefully——"

"Of course!" said Mr. Hammond heartily. "We and everything that's ours belong to you for the present, Miss Ruth."

"Where do we meet the rest of the company?" Tom asked.

"They have been taking some of the interior scenes at Hollywood and will meet you at Seattle. From there you can take a steamer that will carry you to your various locations up the Yukon. Miss Ruth—what is it——"

For Ruth had made a sudden dash for the door and was tugging at it frantically.

"Some one," she gasped, "is out there spying on us!"

CHAPTER V

AN OLD ENEMY

WHILE Ruth Fielding had been in conversation with those in the office she had noticed a curious thing.

A small triangular corner of glass had been broken from the upper panel of the door. For a considerable time Ruth had felt that conviction that comes to every one at times of being closely and furtively watched. Her eyes, almost against her will, had traveled repeatedly to that triangular bit of broken glass. Then suddenly she saw it! That at least could not be imagination! An ear was pressed close to that tiny aperture and while she stared, momentarily paralyzed with astonishment, an eye took its place!

With Ruth, to think was to act. No sooner was she convinced that there was a spy in the hallway outside the door than she was on her feet, tugging madly at the knob.

As the startled and astonished men in the office behind her rose to their feet wondering if she had

taken leave of her senses the door yielded to Ruth's frantic tug and swung inward.

That the spy was completely taken by surprise was evident. The man who had been stooping to the aperture jerked to an upright position as Ruth flashed upon him. For a moment he looked straight at the girl and in that moment Ruth recognized him.

"Charlie Reid!" she gasped. "What are you doing here spying?"

"None of your business!" grumbled the fellow sullenly. "Sol and I know what we're doing——"

But just then Charlie Reid caught sight of Ruth's companions as they hurried to the office doorway. Turning, he dashed down the almost empty corridor and, reaching the stairway, took the steps three at a time and vanished from sight.

"Seemed to be in a pretty big hurry," observed Tom. "Didn't wait for explanations or anything, did he?"

The men ran to the head of the stairs, but the fellow had disappeared. To follow him on foot would be useless, and if they waited for an elevator they would have no better chance of intercepting him.

Bewildered and rather alarmed, they returned to the office to talk over this startling development.

"Not a soul of us saw his face," mourned

McCarty, but Ruth was quick to contradict him.

"I did," she said. "And what's more, I know him—and so do you all!"

They made her sit down and explain.

"It was Charlie Reid," she said excitedly. "And as you all know, he is Sol Bloomberg's right-hand man. It was Charlie who, as agent for Bloomberg, first tempted Viola Callahan to break her contract with me."

"The rascal!" cried Brun, his big hand doubled into a fist. "And to think he got away with a whole neck and his information!"

"But why should Charlie Reid want to spy on us?" asked Mr. Hammond. "Certainly our conversation has been innocent enough and has nothing whatever to do with Reid, or with Bloomberg either, for that matter."

"It's queer, though," mused Ruth, as though speaking aloud. "Charlie Reid spying here, trying to find out what he can of my future plans, right on top of that threatening letter from Sol Bloomberg!"

Naturally the men were more at sea than ever over this reference, since none but Ruth herself and Helen Cameron knew anything of the threatening, venomous letter Bloomberg had sent. Ruth had not even told Tom for fear of needlessly worrying him.

Now, however, it was necessary to make a clean

breast of the facts. In view of what had just happened, the letter from the disgraced producer took on an added importance.

"It looks to me," Ruth finished, "as though the planting of Charlie Reid here to spy upon us and overhear our plans is the first step in Bloomberg's scheme of revenge."

"It isn't revenge, Miss Ruth; it's plain spite," said Mr. Hammond disgustedly. "That fellow had nothing against you except that you succeeded where he tried to make you fail."

"And something tells me," Ruth said, with a little shrug of her shoulders, "that he still has my failure at heart and will leave no stone unturned to accomplish it."

"Well," said Tom, with a squaring of his shoulders and a yearning glance toward the spot in the doorway where Charlie Reid had been, "if either Bloomberg or that Reid chap gets ugly again and tries to start something, we'll show them both they've been in a scrap!"

On the whole, however, Mr. Hammond and his associates seemed inclined to treat Bloomberg and any nefarious schemes he might concoct as beneath their notice and certainly as nothing to worry about.

"He may have guns, Miss Ruth, but he has no powder and shot," Mr. Hammond assured her. "In other words, he is a rattlesnake with his

venom removed. Don't waste your time worrying about him. And meanwhile," he put out his hand as Ruth rose to her feet, "please believe that we are all undyingly grateful to you for helping us out in this emergency. I feel as though a thousand tons had been lifted from my shoulders."

Ruth smiled, with a return of the fighting gleam in her eye.

"I'm glad to be free to undertake it," she said. "And—I'll do my best!"

"That's all we ask!" Mr. Hammond assured her, and this sentiment was echoed with many hearty handshakes by McCarty, Brun and the others.

After Ruth and Tom had left, there was just one among the men in Mr. Hammond's office who was not enthusiastic over the success of the afternoon's conference. This was Raymond Howell, the casting director.

"I'm not as confident of success as you all seem," he told them, and the statement was like a dash of cold water upon their enthusiasm. "I admit that Miss Fielding is a good director—upon her own field. But I don't know that our actors will take kindly to a woman director. They are not used to them, and this one is so young and good-looking that it seems impossible that she is as brainy and competent as they say."

"As we *know,*" Mr. Hammond said quietly. "You have come into our personnel since Miss Fielding left it, Howell, and that is probably why you lack confidence in her ability. You said just now that this girl was a good director in her own field. You forget that this was her original field, the stepping stone to her present success. No, my dear fellow, you may safely lull your fears to rest. In my own mind I have not the slightest doubt that this afternoon's conference has saved to the Alectrion Film Corporation a full forty thousand dollars!"

If Ruth had heard this tribute she would have thrilled with pride at such a proof of Mr. Hammond's confidence in her. It would have done her good too, for, strangely enough, her confidence in herself had been rather severely shaken by the detection of spying Charlie Reid that afternoon.

"I don't like it, Tom. I don't like it at all," she said, as they sped uptown toward the hotel at which they were stopping while in New York. "Bloomberg wouldn't have planted Charlie Reid there to overhear our conference with Mr. Hammond if he hadn't had a good and sufficient reason."

"Perhaps," said Tom, looking at her flushed face and thinking how pretty she was, "Bloomberg didn't plant Charlie at all. How do you

know Reid wasn't there on his own business?"

But Ruth shook her head positively.

"He has no reason to wish me harm," she pointed out. "Except as Bloomberg's agent. Besides, I don't believe Charlie Reid has brains enough to act on his own account. Bloomberg was always the brains, Charlie the tool. I wish," she ended, a bit plaintively, "I knew what the real answer was!"

"Now don't worry," Tom protested. "If Bloomberg has any crooked little game up his sleeve, we'll find it out soon enough. And when he starts something we'll very soon show him who is going to finish it. You beat him once, Ruth, and that only goes to show you can beat him again, and worse."

A dimple appeared at the corner of Ruth's mouth.

"The law of averages——"

"Oh, bother the law of averages," Tom interrupted, good-naturedly. "It isn't going to work in this case. Besides, here we are at our station!"

He led her forth upon the subway platform and in a few moments they were being eagerly greeted by Helen in their suite at the Graymore.

They were to stay over in New York until the following afternoon at least, since another business conference with Mr. Hammond was imperative, for Tom, at any rate. Helen was overjoyed

at this news and declared that she would spend the following morning shopping for the trip to the Yukon.

"Do you really think you ought to go?" Ruth asked, teasing her. "Poor Chess! It really is cruel to leave him all alone!"

"Oh, but think what a long time we'll be married!" Helen protested. "Even Chess couldn't deny me this wonderful chance for a little fun before, before——"

"The end?" suggested Tom, with a grin.

"You put it crudely, Tommy-boy," chuckled Helen, making a face at him. "But I simply couldn't miss this trip. Especially since our old friends Bloomberg and Charlie Reid are stepping into the limelight again, prepared to give us a few thrills."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Ruth dryly, as she examined the location photographs Mr. Hammond had given her that afternoon, "if we will have more thrills than we exactly enjoy before we get through."

CHAPTER VI

PREMONITIONS

HELEN stared at her chum for a moment and her laughing mouth turned downward, lending an expression of momentary gravity to her merry face.

"You don't mean to say, Ruthie Fielding, that you are actually afraid of Sol Bloomberg?"

Ruth laid down the pictures and for the moment her face reflected the gravity of Helen's.

"I *am* afraid of Sol Bloomberg," she told them simply. "Not that I think that he can get the better of me in a long fight. I believe that when it comes to a matter of endurance I have a far better chance than Bloomberg to win."

"You bet you have, especially when you consider your wonderful support!" broke in Tom, with a grin.

"I am considering him," said Ruth, with a grateful glance but no relaxing of her gravity. "That's one of the things that makes me pretty sure of winning in a long race.

"But, oh, you don't realize!" She leaned forward and cupped her little fighting chin in one hand while she regarded her companions with an intense earnestness. "It's impossible for any one to understand who isn't situated as I am how many small annoyances, little enough in themselves, but terrible when you group them all together, a man like Bloomberg can perpetrate. He knows the picture business through and through, he knows just how to hit in a vital spot and just the time to do it. He knows, and Charlie Reid knows too, that small delays mean actual loss in dollars and cents. He knows that when a company of actors is worked up to acting pitch that just some small delay or the introduction of a ludicrous incident will sometimes completely ruin their morale. He knows—but there!" She checked herself and looked a little embarrassed at her impassioned flow of words. "I'm going on dreadfully and you both must think me a regular kill-joy, but you asked me a question, Helen, and I've answered it the best I know how. I *am* afraid of Sol Bloomberg!"

And this fear was in no way lessened during the busy, interest-filled days that followed.

Ruth might gradually have managed to forget Bloomberg had that man not taken great pains to keep himself alive in her memory. The threatening letter she had received from him just before

the Charlie Reid incident proved to be only the first of many.

In the beginning Ruth determined to ignore these sneering missives. But when they continued to pour in upon her she laid the matter in desperation before Tom, and that young gentleman took a prompt and decisive hand in the game.

He wrote just one letter to Sol Bloomberg, and though Ruth never knew exactly what the contents of that letter were, it seemed to have the desired effect upon her enemy.

Bloomberg's threatening missives ceased to come. But they had left their poison in the air behind them and, day or night, Ruth could never banish completely from her mind the vision of a malignant Bloomberg, promising dire things should she go on with her plans and undertake the filming of "The Girl of Gold."

Lucky for Ruth and for Mr. Hammond's hopes that hers was a fighting spirit and that opposition such as Bloomberg's only made her more determined to succeed in spite of him.

It had been necessary for them to stay only one night in New York, since Mr. Hammond, in eager anticipation of Ruth's acceptance of his proposition, anxious as he was to start the serious work of production without further delay, accepted Tom's terms without question and immediately. He had already planned out all the

details of the trip, to which it remained only for Ruth to acquiesce.

On reaching Cheslow, reservations were made at once by Tom on the train that would start the following morning for New York. The girls, while in New York, had done all the necessary shopping—though Helen had taken the heavy end of this undertaking, since Ruth was far too absorbed in her plans and in the scenario of "The Girl of Gold" to care much what she wore on the trip.

So on this particular evening Ruth was at work in her little study at the Red Mill, methodically gathering up all the loose ends of her affairs.

She was leaning over her desk, scanning again the pictures she had selected of the points they were to visit along the Yukon River when there was a slight rustling, and she looked around to see Aunt Alvirah coming into the room.

"I had to come in and sit with you, my pretty, just for a little while," said the old woman, half apologetically. "I won't see you for so long and I never know when you go away on one of these trips whether you'll come back to your old Aunt Alvirah again, or whether she'll be here to see you, when you do."

"Why, Auntie, what a dreadful thing to say!" Ruth was on her feet in an instant and tenderly led the old woman to a chair. "You mustn't talk

like that, you know," taking the wrinkled old hand in both her young ones and rubbing it gently, "or I won't have the heart to go at all!"

"Oh, yes, you will, my pretty. And I wouldn't hold you back if I could—I'm that proud of you! But it's lonesome here at times, and your uncle, my dear——"

"Oh, I know," Ruth broke in quickly. "I know just how trying he can be. But you mustn't let him worry you, dear. It's only his age that makes him so disagreeable, and he really doesn't mean half he says——"

"There's the doorbell!" cried the old lady, as a shrill clamor woke the echoes of the old house. "Oh, my back! and oh, bones! Let me go, my pretty. I must answer it."

"I'd like to see you," mocked Ruth gayly, as she pushed the old woman back into the chair with a firm and gentle hand. "It's probably Tom, anyway."

Ruth started toward the door, but on the instant there came the click of a latch and Tom's cheery whistle sounded within the house.

"Right this way, Tommy-boy," Ruth called. "Aunt Alvirah and I are holding a last minute confab. Join us!"

Tom came in, jaunty and joyful.

"I've made reservations all the way through to Seattle, though we have to change at Chicago," he

told Ruth, after greeting Aunt Alvirah in his usual hearty way. "And, say, Ruthie, I've got a surprise for you. I've reserved a compartment for you and Helen for the whole trip."

For a moment Ruth's face radiated pleasure. Then it clouded again as she asked anxiously:

"What reservations have you made for Tommy-boy?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter about him," and Tom grinned. "He gets a lower berth in the Pullman —and lucky enough not to pull an upper," he added, throwing his hat in one chair and himself in another. "The train is just about packed to capacity. It's the flyer, you know, and mighty popular."

"Then I don't see how you managed to get a compartment," Ruth said, puzzled. "You would think they would all have been snapped up long ago."

"So they were—from Chicago out, at any rate," said Tom. "But the millionaire diamond king that had yours changed his plans at the last minute and relinquished it. Thus my opportunity, which I grasped with both fists, and then some."

"Luxury, thy name is sweet!" sighed Ruth, and went on with her work of gathering up loose ends.

"Where's Helen?" asked Aunt Alvirah suddenly.

So quiet had the little old woman been, lost in the depths of the great chair, that Ruth and Tom had almost forgotten her presence in the room.

Now they both looked at her with the gentle consideration they always reserved for the frail old lady.

"Helen's at home with Chess," said Tom, with a grin. "Holding hands with him and sighing a last sad farewell."

"It *is* right hard on Chess," said Aunt Alvirah gently. "In my day young ladies didn't keep their future husbands waiting around so long. It don't—well, it don't seem quite fair."

Ruth guessed that this was meant as a gentle rebuke to her as well as to Helen. She flushed a little and bent still more intently over her work.

It was Tom who broke the rather awkward silence.

"Oh, Chess doesn't blame her," he said easily. "Thinks she ought to have all the fun coming to her before she has to settle down. His chief worry is that he can't go along with us. Poor old Chess, he works too hard. Thing he needs is to chuck business for a time and take a good long vacation."

"When a man is to be married it's right he should work hard," said Aunt Alvirah, looking so

prim and sweet that Tom got up and enfolded her in a bear hug.

"The thing he ought to do, Auntie," he said, resuming his seat and stretching out his long legs comfortably before him, "is to be like me and get himself interested in the movies. Then he can combine business with pleasure and pleasure with business and everybody's happy!"

"I suppose so," said Aunt Alvirah, with a gentle sigh. "But it wasn't so in my day, indeed it wasn't!"

Not until Aunt Alvirah had gone to bed, complaining patiently of her back and her bones, did Ruth broach the subject that was nearest her heart.

She and Tom were alone, and for a long time nothing had been said between them. They were in the habit of falling into these comfortable silences. A smile touched the corners of Tom's wide, good-humored mouth as he watched Ruth neatly file the last few papers on her desk.

When it was all done Ruth turned around and answered Tom's smile in kind.

"I don't believe I've told you, Tommy-boy," she said earnestly, "just how much I appreciate the sacrifice you've made."

"Sacrifice?" repeated Tom, understanding but pretending that he did not.

"You know what I mean," said Ruth gently.

"It was big of you to give your consent to my undertaking this for Mr. Hammond. Not every one would have done that, under the circumstances, Tommy-boy."

"Oh, I'm quite a remarkable fellow," agreed Tom, with his cheery grin. "But then, so are you a remarkable young lady, Ruth Fielding," he added gravely. "I don't suppose any one understands what you are doing better than I, or appreciates it more. I'm lucky," with another grin, just a bit rueful this time, "that you let me hang around at all!"

But Ruth was suddenly very much in earnest. She leaned forward and for just a moment let her hand rest lightly over Tom's.

"Don't ever say that again, Tommy-boy," she said. "If I have succeeded, so have you. You don't know how much you have helped me. Why, I just wouldn't know how to go on without you!"

"As long as you feel that way about it, Ruth," said Tom, very sincerely touched, "then I don't care—a lot—about anything else!"

CHAPTER VII

CHESS GOES ALONG

DESPITE the fact that she went to bed in a mood of exhilaration and full of eager anticipation for the start of the trip, Ruth had an exceedingly bad night.

She dreamed of Sol Bloomberg all during those hours when she should have been gathering strength for the struggle to come.

She woke at last, heavy-eyed and headachy and with a sense of depression that even the bright sunlight of a glorious morning did little to dispel.

Uncle Jabez was in an unusually crabbed mood and inclined to complain about everything, from the golden eggs, each surrounded by a tempting little island of white, to the aromatic cup of strong coffee.

It was perhaps her efforts to soothe the cranky old man and so make things easier for Aunt 'Alvirah that dissipated Ruth's own blue feelings.

At any rate, by the end of breakfast she was all on fire with enthusiasm again and impatiently eager for the sound of Tom's motor horn.

The sound of the motor horn came just as she was hugging Aunt Alvirah for perhaps the hundredth time and promising her all over again that she would take care of herself and not get killed in a train wreck or fall overboard from a steamer.

With a little cry of excitement Ruth reached for her hat and bag. She was just cramming the former over her dark hair and had reached for the latter when Tom flung in at the door.

"Come on, Ruthie!" he cried. "Just time to make the train. Hullo, Uncle Jabez and good-bye. Aunt Alvirah, give me a kiss. Yes, I'll take good care of Ruth. I will, on my sacred word of honor! And in addition I'll see to it that she writes to you at least once a day, if not oftener. For that do I get an extra piece of pie when I come back?"

With such a flood of nonsense did Tom beguile the little old lady and eventually managed to turn the tears of parting into smiles. Then he and Ruth hurried to the car where Helen awaited them.

"Where's Chess?" asked Ruth, noticing the absence of "Lasses."

"We have to stop and pick him up," Helen explained. "He wasn't ready when we passed by before. Had to get his bag packed."

"'His bag packed,'" Ruth repeated, puzzled. "Why in the world would he have to pack his bag just to see you off?"

"Oh, I forgot you hadn't heard the latest," said Helen, with an innocent air. "Chess is going with us."

"Going with us!" repeated Ruth helplessly. "Isn't this sudden?"

"Well—er—yes," agreed Helen, her eyes dancing. "But then you know Chess is like that—sort of sudden and unexpected. I think that's why he manages to keep me interested most of the time."

"Tom, won't you please explain?" Ruth turned in desperation to the latter. "Helen is the most exasperating girl at times. When did Chess decide to go along with us? You didn't say a word about it last night."

"And for a very good reason," said Tom, slowing to a stop before the Cheslow hotel. "When I got home from your house last night, Ruthie, I found Lasses still parked on the paternal doorstep. By the time I had succeeded in running him off the premises by the nape of his neck——"

"Oh, you did not!" Helen interrupted indignantly. "I'd like to see you!"

"By the time I had succeeded in kicking him out," Tom went on imperturbably, "he and my kid sister——"

"Kid sister!" interjected Helen, still indignant. "When we are twins!"

"Had decided that Chess was to go along. Ah," with a welcoming tooting of the horn, "if I am not very much mistaken, here comes our good old friend Lasses in the flesh."

The fact of it was that there was a man in Seattle who Chess thought it would be good business to see personally. If he could win over this man, who was really quite a personage in the world of finance, to a favorable consideration of the business proposition Chess had to lay before him, the young fellow felt, and with justice, that the expenses of this trip and of many others like it would be more than offset by the making of this valuable new connection. Of course, there was no reason at all why Chess should go on to Alaska with his friends, except a natural desire to have one last holiday with Helen before they married and "settled down."

Chess carried two suitcases which he declared would serve him bountifully on the trip.

"All I need is a change or two," he declared optimistically, as he flung the grips into the tonneau, narrowly escaping Helen's feet. "Plenty for an unpretentious young fellow like me!"

"You talk as if you were only crossing over the state line," Helen retorted. "This is no overnight journey, I'll have you know, Chess

Copley. Seattle is many, many miles away from here."

"To say nothing of the Yukon," added Tom, as he swung the car about in the direction of the station.

"Fourteen days from Seattle to St. Michael," chanted Helen, as though reciting a lesson. "And from there overland and by dog sled to the Yukon. Oh, Adventure, let me hasten to embrace thee before thou slippest from my grasp!"

"You've got your information mixed, Helen," said her twin. "There won't be any dog sled in this trip. We just keep right on steaming up the Yukon from St. Michael until we come to Knockout Point, which is the particular little jumping off place that's been selected."

"I hope there is a doctor on board," said Chess, with a mock anxious glance at his fiancée. "Something tells me we may need his services!"

"Mighty glad you decided to go with us, Chess," said Ruth, seeing a revengeful gleam in Helen's eye and deciding to change the subject in a hurry. "I must admit the change in your plan is something of a shock—though of course a very joyful one."

"Well for you that you added that postscript, woman," laughed Chess. "You see, Ruthie, it's this way. There is some important business to be attended to——"

"Up the Yukon?" asked Ruth, with a laugh.

"Up the Yukon, young lady, as well as in Seattle, though your very inflection is an insult," returned the grinning Chess. "I was going to send some one else, and then I decided that this little matter called for really expert attention——"

"Ahem!" loudly from Helen.

"Had an awful time inventing this business in Alaska, didn't you, Chess?" and Ruth's eyes twinkled.

"And of course, under the circumstances, there was only one thing to do and that was to send myself to take care of the job. Simple, what?"

"Very!" said Ruth, with a smile. "And awfully pleasant. It will make our party quite complete!"

At that moment the auto turned into the street that led to the station and they saw the train bowling toward them.

"Just in time!" roared Chess. "Put on steam, old boy! We don't want to be left waiting at the church!"

Tom brought the car to a standstill close to the platform and jumped out, leaving Chess to look after the girls and the luggage.

He rushed into the station and found the telegraph operator, who was an acquaintance of long standing.

"Say, do me a favor, Banks, old man, will you?" he cried. "Take the old bus back home when you go and leave it in the garage?"

"Sure," answered Banks. "Gives me a ride free for nothing. Hurry up, my lad. There goes the whistle."

Tom had just time to swing himself up the steps as the train began to move.

"Pretty close call," he laughed, as he joined the others. "Got all your baggage and everything? All set?"

"All set for the Yukon!" cried Chess jubilantly. "Already I hear the call of the wild!"

CHAPTER VIII

A MAGIC TRIP

"MAYBE it was just Helen you heard, Chess," chuckled Ruth, and Helen gazed at her chum reproachfully.

"Do you mean to say that I am wild, Ruthie? How can you? Why, there never was a meeker, more down-trodden——"

"Write it on the ice!" suggested Chess in atrocious slang that Helen did not even deign to notice.

To prevent one of the good-natured squabbles that so often took place between these two, Ruth immediately began to talk about their prospects.

"It seems a long enough journey to Seattle," she said. "But really that's only about the first stage of the journey."

"Four days and three nights, isn't it?" asked Helen.

"The flyer makes it in a little better time," said Tom. "But it's approximately that."

"Then we meet the others of the company,"

said Ruth, "and take the steamer for St. Michael. That's the chief distributing center, you know. There we'll have to take a smaller steamer for the rest of the way."

"That's the part I'll love," cried Helen enthusiastically. "It's always so much more fun to travel by ship than overland."

The rest of the trip to New York, though enlivened by high spirits and merry chatter, was uneventful. The train arrived not only on time, but a little ahead of it. Which, for that particular line, was rather unusual.

They had decided to postpone luncheon until they were safely established on the western bound train. Now, as they gathered up wraps and other belongings in a flurry of excitement, Helen confessed to an extreme and gnawing hunger.

"I don't think I can ever wait till we get on board the train, Ruthie," she complained plaintively. "I am really ravenous. If we should pass a sandwich stand anywhere along the way, don't be surprised if I make a wild dash for a frankfurter and rolls, or some other such delicacy."

It was necessary for Chess to make a last-minute rush to the ticket office, since he had made no reservation. He was lucky enough to secure an upper berth in the same car with Tom, so that the party would be pretty close together.

"Lucky you could grab off anything, Chess, old

boy," said Tom, as the latter came up to them panting.

"That'll be all right," said Chess. "I'd made up my mind to come if I had to sleep on the roof."

"By comparison the upper ought to be quite comfortable," chuckled Helen, and Chess was heard to murmur something about "having suspected before that that girl had no heart and now was quite sure of it."

Gayly they allowed an obsequious porter—he was obsequious because Tom had tipped him generously in advance and commissioned him to let the young ladies in the compartment lack for no comfort during the journey—to lead them to their particular private little cubbyhole which was to be such a luxury to them on the long trip.

Suitcases disposed of, the girls looked about them with all the pride of possession.

"Oh, isn't this perfectly scrumptious, Ruthie Fielding?" cried Helen. "I'll tell you we are traveling de luxe this time."

Ruth closed the door of the compartment against curious eyes and sank down on one of the cushioned seats which at night could be converted into fairly comfortable beds.

"It's all perfectly wonderful," she agreed with Helen. "One usually doesn't expect much privacy on a train. But, oh, Tom," with an appeal-

ing glance at the latter, "how about something to eat?"

"And that time you hit the nail right on the head, Ruthie," agreed Tom cheerfully. "I shall order lunch at once, and unless you young ladies object to our society——"

"We *should,*" murmured Helen.

"We will dine right here in comfort——"

"To say nothing of style!" finished Ruth, with a delighted laugh. "Oh, Tom, please do!"

Tom rang the bell that would summon the porter and struck an attitude.

"Waiter! The tray!" he declared, and a second later as though the words and not the bell had summoned the black genii of the train, there came a knock upon the door.

Tom sent for a menu card and when it came ordered what sounded to them all like a sumptuous feast.

"The boy is good," said Chess, when the party was once more alone. "He ordered enough for another half dozen of us."

"And I thought this was to be lunch!" sighed Helen.

However, when the order arrived there proved to be no more of it than the ravenous young people could take care of. It was the merriest meal they had ever had, and that was saying a good

deal, since they had partaken of many merry meals together.

There was something that appealed to their imagination in the privacy of the compartment, in the fact that, aboard that crowded train, they four could be as much alone as though they were in the dining-room of the house at the Red Mill.

Even the train itself seemed enveloped in the same glamorous mist—a sort of dream train, speeding them on toward romance and adventure.

The illusion continued during all of that long journey across the continent. Never once did their spirits flag or that utter boredom that is so often the accompaniment of a long trip descend upon them.

Chess and Tom declared that they were perfectly comfortable in the Pullman coach, and as for the girls, they slept as soundly as though they were back in their own familiar beds at home.

The delight of dining alone in a stateroom never palled, and they whiled away the long daylight hours of the journey reading or chatting or discussing with Ruth the filming of Mr. Hammond's picture, "The Girl of Gold." Ruth herself spent many hours in studying both the novel and the scenario.

As the scenery became more rugged and beautiful they spent more and more time on the observation platform, sometimes only leaving it

when hunger drove them inside to appease their appetite.

Occasionally the train stopped long enough at way stations to permit of their stretching cramped legs and lazy muscles in a short walk. They never failed to take advantage of these occasional breaks and always came back to the train with an increased eagerness to be on their way.

It was only at Chicago that an incident occurred that sufficed to shatter Ruth's enjoyment of the trip for a time.

In the city of the lakes it was necessary for them to change trains for points still farther West. Tom had secured a compartment for the girls on the second train, as well, so that the change was actually only a matter of shifting their baggage and themselves from one train to another.

But when they were on the platform and just about to board the Seattle train, Helen suddenly hissed a sentence in Ruth's ears that made the latter stand still as though she had been shot.

"That's our old friend Charlie Reid, Ruthie! Look quickly! Directly back of you!"

CHAPTER IX

CHARLIE AGAIN?

RUTH looked, but not in time to see the face of the person Helen pointed out. To be sure, the back looked familiar and the walk was strongly reminiscent of Charlie Reid. But she could not be sure.

"Wasn't it?" hissed Helen, as at the heels of their porter, the boys bundled them into the train.

Ruth was flushed and excited. She shook her head.

"I only saw his back, Helen. I—don't know!"

No more was said about it until the girls were safely established in their new quarters and Chess and Tom had excused themselves to find their own seats in the sleeper.

"I'm sure it was Charlie Reid, Ruth," said Helen then. She herself was tremendously excited, though her emotion was of a different kind from Ruth's. To Helen this unlooked-for appearance of Charlie Reid—if indeed it were he—meant a break in the monotony of the train trip

and a little added interest in things in general. While to Ruth, the possibility that they had been trailed so far by Charlie Reid meant only one thing. And that was that Sol Bloomberg was still determined on harming her in some way.

"If that was really Charlie Reid," she said tensely, "then I might just as well bid good-bye right now to my peace of mind, Helen. Before long it will be gone entirely, broken into a thousand pieces."

"Which—your peace of mind or Charlie?" asked Helen flippantly.

She came and sat beside Ruth and patted her hand in a manner that was meant to be soothing and only served at the moment to irritate the harassed young director.

Ruth drew her hand away as gently as she could and with a resigned gesture put back a lock of hair that had become dislodged.

"You can laugh all you like, Helen," she sighed. "But I can tell you, Sol Bloomberg is nothing to laugh at, and if he has set his little hound on my trail, it behooves Miss Ruth Fielding to watch her step!"

"I'll trust you for that," said Helen.

Seeing that Ruth was really disturbed she did her best to mend the situation.

"Perhaps it wasn't Charlie Reid after all," she suggested, though in her heart she was almost

sure that it was. She, at least, had obtained a fairly good view of the man's face. "It was dim in the station, anyway, and Charlie Reid has a rather ordinary type of face. I suppose there are thousands of them scattered all over the world."

But despite Helen's loyal attempts to get her friend's mind off the subject, that day was completely spoiled for Ruth.

It was decided by the two girls, at Ruth's suggestion, that they should say nothing concerning their suspicions to the boys just then.

"Time enough when we are sure we are being followed," said Ruth, and Helen agreed with her that there was really no end to be gained by speaking of the incident.

Even had they been right in identifying the man they had glimpsed on the platform as Charlie Reid, neither Ruth nor Helen could advance any theory as to why the fellow was following them. But they knew that if this was indeed Ruth's enemy, he would sooner or later reveal his purpose to them, and they were in no hurry for that time to come.

As a matter of fact, as time went on and their journey neared a close, both Ruth and Helen became nearly convinced that it was not Charlie Reid they had seen in the station at all. For the person they had thought was Reid had certainly

boarded the train with them. Knowing this, the girls made repeated excursions throughout the length of the train and examined every passenger closely while, at the same time, not appearing to do so.

But they saw no sign of Charlie Reid. Either he had boarded the train and left it at the very next stop or he was keeping himself well hidden.

The failure to see anything of Reid helped drive the unpleasant incident from Ruth's mind, and by the time they reached Seattle, Bloomberg had once more faded into a rather dim background.

The morning on which they were due at their destination found them really sorry to terminate their Arabian Nights' train trip.

"I never had so much fun," sighed Helen, as they sat among freshly packed grips with their hats and wraps close at hand. "After this no one can ever tell me that traveling is a bore. I shall contradict them rudely!"

"It has been a lark," Ruth agreed. "I've felt all along as though we were riding in a private train."

"Maybe you will be some day; who knows," said Tom, with a smile, and Ruth's own quick smile answered it.

"Not for a considerable time yet, Tom, if

ever," she said. "But it is sort of fun to play with the idea, isn't it?"

"May I ask what plans your August Highness has made for us, once we reach Seattle?" asked Chess.

"Tom knows. He does all that sort of thing for me, you know," said Ruth, with a grateful glance at the young fellow. "We are stopping at the Tevor-Grand, aren't we, Tom—there to meet the rest of the crowd?"

Tom nodded and Helen said eagerly:

"Who are the crowd, Ruth? Will there be many?"

"About twelve actors, three cameramen and two directors," said Ruth, looking remarkably businesslike as she counted them off on her fingers. "There will be quite a company of us—and all picked players at that."

"But why two assistant directors?" Helen asked. "I should think you were a dozen all rolled into one, Ruthie."

"She is the big one, of course," Tom explained, a proud note in his voice.

"The big cheese, the whole works, so to speak," Chess interpolated.

"Just about," returned the grinning Tom. "These two other directors are merely understudies, you understand, directing the minor scenes

and otherwise taking some of the load off her shoulders."

"I shouldn't think they would enjoy being bossed about by a girl," said Helen. She had spoken impulsively and was instantly sorry when she saw a shadow of uneasiness cross Ruth's face.

"That has worried me just a little," Ruth confessed. "A woman director is at a disadvantage with a man because the men in the company always seem to go on the assumption that she's no good until she proves the contrary. There are good woman directors in the moving picture business——"

"Ladies and gentlemen, the proof is right before your eyes," murmured Helen with a mischievous glance at Ruth.

"But they have always had to work twice as hard to prove their ability as a man in the same position," finished Ruth.

"All the more credit to the woman when she gets there, then," said Helen.

Ruth smiled.

"But that doesn't make the fight any the easier," she pointed out.

Tom was about to reassure her on this point when there was a knock on the door. It was the porter to announce that they were just slowing into Seattle and to get their suitcases.

Chess gave a whoop of joy and grabbed up his hat.

"All ashore that's going ashore," he chortled, dropping the hat long enough to put Helen's on her head hindside before, at which the young lady was tremendously indignant. "Follow me, ladies and gentlemen, and I will show you the sights of this famous seaport——"

"Oh, Chess, do hush!" cried Helen, as they joined the tide of humanity sweeping down the aisles. "Every one is looking at you."

"Might as well give 'em a treat," replied that youth, with irrepressible good humor. "No one ever accused me of having a stone where my heart ought to be!"

Chess's high spirits were infectious, and before they reached the street and a taxicab they were all weak with mirth. Chess could be irresistibly funny when he wanted to, and this was evidently one of those occasions.

"Aren't you glad we brought him along?" Helen asked of her chum, regarding her fiancé as if he were some strange kind of animal. "As a circus clown, I declare he can't be beat—oh, dear me, Chess, do ask that taxi driver to be a little more careful! That time he tried to upset a truck."

"Let him have his fun if he likes it," Chess

returned imperturbably. "He's entitled to a little recreation in his off hours."

Despite the seemingly reckless driving of the chauffeur through traffic that was nothing short of murderous, the four young people managed to reach the Tevor-Grand Hotel whole and in their right minds.

Tom, as usual thoughtful and reliable, had wired ahead for rooms, and upon registering his little party at the desk was treated by the deferential clerk in charge with as much civility as though he had been an old patron of the hotel.

When Ruth asked about the company, mentioning the names of the directors, she was informed that they had arrived only a short time before.

Two porters caught up their luggage and Ruth turned with the others toward the elevators. Suddenly she gave a little gasp and stood still, her eyes traveling across the lobby to the door of the writing room at the farther side.

"Am I dreaming?" she cried. "Or was that really Charlie Reid?"

CHAPTER X

A TANTALIZING GLIMPSE

HELEN, being close at Ruth's side, was the only one to hear the latter's startled, half-whispered exclamation.

By the time Tom and Chess had noticed the defection of the two girls and had started back toward them, Ruth had recovered her composure.

"What's the idea of holding up the parade?" Chess demanded jovially.

"Is there anything you want? If so I'll get it for you," Tom added.

"Oh, millions of things, Tommy-boy," Helen cried before Ruth could speak and so betray her agitation. "That really was a very rash promise, but we won't take you up on it. What we want most right now is rest and privacy and perchance a bite of refreshment. Lead on, lead on!"

Ruth was grateful to her chum for so disguising her own agitation and dismay. Helen's continuous chatter as they were carried up in the elevator prevented either Tom or Chess from

noticing or commenting upon her rather tight-lipped silence.

The elevator stopped and they followed the porter down a rather dark and gloomy corridor richly carpeted so as to muffle the heaviest footfall.

They went first to the girls' rooms. A key was slipped into a lock and they entered the regulation hotel room, rather stuffy and gloomy, though comfortably furnished, with a bath attached and a door leading off into a smaller room. In the larger of the two rooms the bed wore the disguise of a cretonne-covered couch, thus transforming the bedroom into a rather attractive sitting room during the daytime.

"Here's your reception room, Ruth," said Tom, "where you can meet your actors and confab to your heart's content. Like it?"

"All perfectly lovely, Tom dear, although we really didn't need the extra room. Still it will be lovely, having the two," she added quickly, unwilling to spoil Tom's satisfaction. "It gives one space to move about in."

"And now," said Helen, making a face at the boys, "clear out of here, both of you! I know Ruthie wants to rest for a while before she has all that crowd of actors and cameramen and what not coming down on her!"

"I suppose," said Chess, looking doleful, "that

business must spoil our pleasure some time. Why not now!"

Ruth laughed.

"It will be pretty nearly all business with Tom and me from now on," she said. "But that needn't prevent you and Helen from having all the good times you like."

"Maybe not," sighed Helen. "But Chess's business will stand horribly in the way of pleasure. I presume for a while I'm doomed to play all by myself. Hustle your old man, will you, Chess?"

"If he's to be hustled, yes. But his kind are sometimes annoyingly deliberate."

"Oh, well, go to it, you busy bees, and I will laze gloriously while I look on with pity for all of you. Me for a show this afternoon."

When the boys had gone to their rooms, only a door or two further down the corridor, Helen asked Ruth if she had really seen Charlie Reid in the hotel lobby.

"I can't be sure," Ruth answered, her voice low and troubled. "I just caught a glimpse of a man that looked like him, but as I turned around he dodged into the door of the writing room."

"That would seem to show that it was really Charlie Reid you saw," Helen pointed out. "For Charlie would surely be careful about letting you know he was following you just yet."

"That's what I thought," agreed Ruth, a little wearily. "Anyway, I wouldn't say anything about it to the boys for a while, Helen. We'll wait until Charlie really does something before we complain. Besides, I can't even be sure it was Charlie I saw. It may be that I'm thinking of him so much that I just naturally see him about me wherever I go."

"Let's hope that's the answer, Ruth dear," said Helen, going over to her chum and giving her a warm kiss. "In the meantime don't go worrying your head about it. The two of us together are more than a match for Charlie Reid!"

Ruth was rather glad that Helen had planned to go to a matinée, for that left her perfectly free to attend to the very important business at hand—that of meeting and becoming acquainted with the actors, cameramen and assistant directors with whom she was to be so closely associated during the next few months.

They began to gather in her room shortly after two o'clock.

Edith Lang came first, accompanied by Layton Boardman, and these two both Ruth and Tom met with enthusiasm. They had been associated with the two actors in the making of Ruth's last picture at Golden Pass and had liked and admired them immensely.

Boardman, who had taken the lead in Ruth's

picture, was a splendid actor of Western parts and a fine fellow as well. Edith Lang was the crippled actress who had given Ruth valuable pointers in an art in which she herself was very proficient.

Crippled as she had been while engaged in Red Cross work during the World War, and so more or less exiled from a profession that had been the breath of life to her, Edith Lang had once more come into her own.

Her part as the cripple in "The Girl of Gold" was a heavy emotional one, calling for exactly the type of acting which had made Edith Lang famous.

"I can't tell you how happy it makes me to see you again," she told Ruth, grasping the latter's hands in both her own. "And under such very happy circumstances! My dear Miss Fielding, can you imagine slowly starving to death and then having presented to you a feast sumptuous beyond your wildest imaginings? That is what this rôle means to me!"

There were others gathering in the doorway, and Ruth went to meet them eagerly.

There were the two assistant directors, Gerard Bolton and Maurice Brandt. The former was a stockily built man with extremely broad shoulders and a forehead that jutted heavily over deep-set gray eyes. It was the forehead, Ruth decided

after a second look, that made him look so pugnacious, as if, having once got hold of an idea, he would be extraordinarily slow to relinquish it.

However, he was pleasant enough, and his companion, Maurice Brandt, was extremely talkative and cordial.

Ruth decided that Maurice Brandt might prove a trifle too self-assertive upon further acquaintance, and then and there prepared to resist him with some self-assertiveness of her own.

The leading lady was Alice Lytelly, a fluffy little blonde who ought to do well in the rather unexacting title rôle. Despite the gushing greeting of the latter, Ruth read temperament in the stormy blue eyes of the star and the pouting, too-full, red lips. Ruth had had experience before with temperamental stars, and she knew just how to catalogue Miss Lytelly.

There were others in rôles of varying importance, from the tall, distinguished-looking "father" of the heroine and the pitiful, humpbacked dwarf who played the villain of the piece to the lad of eleven, freckle-faced and elfish, who took the part of the star's younger brother and who by his astuteness and precocity managed to discover the designs of the villain and lead the hero to his hiding place.

This youngster, by name Eben Howe, was to become, as Tom teasingly said, his rival in Ruth's

affections. However much that may be an overstatement of fact, it certainly is true that Ruth liked the mischievous, freckled boy at sight and that Eben developed an adoration for the young director of the company that was like the devotion of a good-natured, tail-wagging collie dog.

Such was the general personnel of the company of actors Ruth was to direct in a moving picture of the first magnitude, "The Girl of Gold."

The three cameramen, Traymore, Schultz and Atwater, were all pleasant and competent men, and Ruth felt instinctively that there would be little friction in her association with them.

Artists, every one of them in their line—in this day of the "super-film," there is a great deal more importance to the work of the cameramen than is generally suspected—they all had heard of her and respected her ability and had decided to give their best in service to their youthful "chief."

Ruth felt this and was grateful for it. But about the actors and the two directors, she was not so sure. She seemed to sense a slight undercurrent of resentment toward her—partly, perhaps, because of her youth, partly because of her sex.

But it was in the person of the dwarf that this resentment seemed to crystallize. Ruth shuddered merely to look at the deformed, twisted body of Joe Rumph. Once she caught his deep-

set black eyes gazing intently at her from under beetling brows and beneath that somewhat sinister look her flesh actually crawled as though some slimy creature had trailed its length across her.

When it was over and they had all gone off, informed of Ruth's plans for the morrow's start, Ruth flung herself into a chair and pressed a hand over her eyes as though to shut out some unwelcome vision.

Tom, who had been thoroughly enjoying himself and who had found a kindred spirit in one of the jovial cameramen, Bert Traymore, looked surprised at Ruth's strange gesture. He came over to her anxiously and rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Buck up, Ruth," he said. "What's wrong?"

"That horrid Joe Rumph," cried Ruth, in a muffled voice, hands still pressed close before her eyes. "Did you notice how he looked at me? I don't like him, Tom! Why, I'd just as soon take a venomous snake along with the company as that man!"

CHAPTER XI

A CHANCE REVELATION

TOM CAMERON laughed at Ruth's statement and tried to reassure her. But Ruth could not be shaken from her stand.

"Rumph dislikes me and mistrusts me for some reason, Tom," she insisted. "I have not been in this profession so long, meeting all types and kinds of people, without learning a few things—and one of them is to be able to judge pretty accurately the attitude of my actors toward me. You don't know how sensitive a director is to atmosphere, Tom. I suppose he has to traffic so much in emotions, both artificial and real, that he becomes supersensitive to them. Anyway, I know I can always tell whether an actor has confidence in me and whether he is working for or against me. And this dwarf, Rumph, is going to work against me every inch of the way! Of that much I am sure!"

Ruth had removed her hands from before her face and was sitting with them clasped tightly in

her lap. She leaned toward Tom and spoke with an earnestness that could not fail to impress him. He had learned long ago to place trust in Ruth's almost uncanny gift of reading people and motives. She seemed to know sometimes what her associates were going to do and how they were going to do it almost before they were aware of their own designs.

So on this occasion he looked grave and troubled and put one of his own big hands over her clasped ones.

"I'm sorry you feel this way, Ruth," he said. "It seems to me Rumph plays a pretty important part in the picture. It would be rather hard to get along without him, wouldn't it?"

To his surprise Ruth shook her head vehemently in the negative.

"Not the way I see it," she said. "I have watched this—this afflicted creature work in other pictures, and he has never failed to make me sick with mingled pity and loathing. I have always felt—I may be wrong, but I don't believe so—that the audience agreed with me. People go to the moving pictures to be amused and, in some cases, edified, but they don't go to see monstrosities. It seems to me that it offends the ordinary normal-minded person to see a deformity, such as Rumph's, exploited, brought into the limelight. It seems to me—and again I may be wrong—

that I could make a far more striking, more powerful picture without Joe Rumph than with him."

"But the book!" protested Tom. "It is necessary, isn't it, to make the film production as near like the finished story as possible?"

"Of course," said Ruth. "But if you will remember, the villain of the novel was no such deformed creature as Rumph. He had been crippled, it is true, in a railroad accident and his spine so hurt that he would always be a marked man, but he was no such repulsive animal as this Rumph!"

Ruth shuddered again and Tom laughed ruefully.

"I must admit myself he isn't any beauty," he said, beginning to stride up and down the room. "But if you should get rid of Rumph what would you do for a villain? No ordinary actor could take that part, you know."

"No," admitted Ruth simply. But there was the queer little secret look in her face that Tom had often surprised there when Ruth was seized by inspiration. "No ordinary actor could. But —have you noticed Carlton Brewer?"

"The one who plays the hero's best friend—the spineless, good-natured, devoted lad whose idiocy is always getting him into laughable scrapes?" Tom wanted to know.

"The same," said Ruth, her eyes half-closed in

dreamy contemplation of some vision that only she herself could see. "His part in this picture is not impressive, I'm bound to admit, but I am convinced that that boy would make a great actor if he had only half a chance."

"But the cripple part of it," Tom protested. "Carlton Brewer is one of the best set-up lads I ever saw."

"Oh, Tommy, Tommy, you're funny," cried Ruth, laughing a little with suppressed excitement. "Do you mean to tell me that you have been connected with this profession this long without learning that with a little artificial make-up the straightest back can be bent and a most convincing screen cripple made? And incidentally Abe Levy—did you notice him? The little good-looking, curly-haired Jew with the cheerful smile —is one of the cleverest make-up men in the profession. I'm willing to bet that with a little coaxing on my part he could make the loveliest cripple out of Carlton Brewer that you ever saw!"

Tom stopped before her and gazed down at her with that slightly bewildered, wholly admiring wonder that was a part of his affection for the girl.

"I believe anybody would do almost anything for you when you look like that, Ruth Fielding!" he said.

She made a little face at him and for a while they relapsed into a thoughtful silence.

At last Tom said:

"If you feel that way about it, I'd be willing to back your judgment to the limit. Mr. Hammond has given you full leave to exercise your discretion. Why don't you discharge Rumph and have it over with?"

But Ruth shook her head, a shadow once more clouding her face.

"Not yet," she said. "I don't want to make any radical change until I feel that I have the full confidence of my company. And it may take me some time to win that, Tom!"

If Ruth could have been present at a conference of some of her actors and directors in Layton Boardman's room, she would have found her forebodings justified.

Gerard Bolton was speaking at the moment.

"She's clever, all right," he admitted. "You can see that. But I doubt if she has the ability to handle a picture like 'The Girl of Gold.'"

"She can do it if any one can," said Layton Boardman. "Look at the work she did in 'Snowblind' and this last picture at Golden Pass."

"She is one of those rare people," Edith Lang spoke up, also in Ruth's support, "who have the imagination and ability not only to write the script of her plays but to direct the filming as well."

"She did not write the script for 'The Girl of Gold,' " Bolton pointed out.

"No, but I believe she thoroughly understands it," Edith Lang flashed back at him.

"That," retorted the director, with a cynical lifting of eyebrows, "remains to be seen!"

"I don't like working under the direction of a woman, never did!" It was the growling tones of Joe Rumph that broke into the conversation. "I don't know what the boss was thinking of to put a kid like that over us! It's my belief that this whole thing's going to be a complete flop!"

There was a deep and significant silence while the others looked at him. The dwarf was not popular with his fellow actors. For, where his terrible deformity might have excited pity, his rough manner and bitter words rejected it. But at this moment, despite the loyal defense of the two actors who had worked with Ruth in her last picture, the consensus of opinion was with Joe Rumph.

From all appearances, Ruth Fielding's road to success on this occasion was to be by no means an easy one!

However, the next day, which was to mark the start of the journey to the Yukon, dawned hopefully clear and bright and Ruth awoke with a tremendous enthusiasm to start on her great adventure.

Helen was lazy and hard to get up.

After her matinée Helen had done a little window shopping. She was delighted with the great stores, saying that they reminded her of those in New York, only that they were "much more fascinating."

When Chess came back to the hotel from his business interview, jubilant and declaring that he had "landed his big fish," Helen was waiting for him and still blissfully employed in happy mental contemplation of gorgeous shop windows.

She was very enthusiastic about his good news, however, and gayly agreed to dine sumptuously with him and go that evening to the best show in town in honor of the great occasion.

Small wonder, then, that morning found her still sleepy and in no mood to hurry, as Ruth begged her to.

"You might let a fellow be," Helen murmured reproachfully, as she succeeded with great effort in getting her second eye open.

"I'll let you be in earnest if you don't get busy and hustle," Ruth retorted, as she combed her pretty hair and wound it neatly about her head. "Are you aware that our steamer leaves Seattle promptly at nine-thirty? Perhaps," she added innocently, but with mischievous intent, "you and Chess like Seattle so much that you would like

to stay here and not go to the Yukon with us, after all!"

With deep resignation Helen got up then and looked sleepily for her shoe under the bed.

"You can be the most cruel thing when you want to, Ruthie Fielding," she complained. "Sometimes I just don't know how I go on loving you at all!"

It was only after a wild scramble on Helen's part—and on Ruth's, too, since she was forced to pack Helen's grip as well as her own—that they succeeded in reaching the dock in time to board the steamer.

Ruth found her company at the wharf before her and was relieved to find, as the gangplank was drawn up, that no one had been left behind.

"Except Joe Rumph," she whispered to Tom, as the space slowly widened between the ship and the wharf. "I think I could have been quite content to have left *him* behind!"

The bustle and activity of the harbor was an inspiration in itself. Ruth's eyes sparkled as she gazed out over the busy scene. Ships of all sizes and descriptions crowded the port. Except for the addition of many lumber boats, Ruth might almost have imagined herself back in New York, gazing out over lower New York Harbor.

The steamer was crowded and it was with difficulty that Tom kept his little flock together. He

managed to get them all safely established finally in the staterooms he had reserved for them, and then came back to rejoin Ruth, who had lingered on deck, watching the shipping on Puget Sound.

"Some crowd, eh?" he greeted her buoyantly, as he fought his way through to her side. "This is the Yukon's open season, and it seems as if the whole world had taken advantage of the fact. What are you thinking about so deeply, Ruth?"

For answer Ruth put a hand upon his arm and held up a finger warningly.

"Listen!" she said in a low voice.

Somewhere behind them a laughing voice came clearly to their ears.

"Wonder if we'll run into Sol Bloomberg on this trip?"

"Sol Bloomberg!" returned another voice, surprised. "What's the idea?"

"Why, hadn't you heard?" The first speaker was evidently incredulous. "Bloomberg has gone to Alaska."

CHAPTER XII

DISHEARTENING NEWS

For a moment it seemed to Ruth as though her heart sank down into the toes of her shoes.

Sol Bloomberg in Alaska! And they were going there! Instead of leaving him farther and farther behind with every mile they had traversed, as she had fondly hoped, their journey was taking them steadily nearer to a possible meeting with him, with the man who had vowed "to get even with her if it took him the rest of his life!"

Ruth turned on impulse to face the two speakers. She had thought she recognized the voices, and now she saw that she was right.

They were two minor actors of the company. While not taking any important part, they were, nevertheless, practically invaluable to the company because of their ability to "fit in" at odd and sometimes critical moments.

They were pleasant lads, both of them, and by name, Todd and Downey.

Now Ruth turned to them eagerly.

"What was that you said about Bloomberg?" she asked, doing her best to make the tone of the question sound casual. "I couldn't help overhearing——"

The taller of the two lads, Todd, smiled pleasantly.

"I was just saying that it would be a good joke if we were to run into Bloomberg in Alaska," he repeated obligingly. "I heard that he had gone somewhere up the Yukon to run a gambling place."

"Just about the sort of thing you might expect Bloomberg to do," said Tom, with a grimace of distaste.

"He was a gambler, you know, before he turned to the motion picture game," said Todd. "I suppose now that he is down and out in his chosen profession, he's gone back to his old trade."

"Probably hopes to make a lot of money quick and retrieve his fortunes," hazarded Tom.

"H'm!" said Ruth absently. "I hadn't heard!" She thereupon fell into a deep study from which Tom found it impossible to arouse her for some time.

Bloomberg in Alaska running a gambling place! That was why Charlie Reid had been in New York to spy upon her and not Bloomberg himself.

Again the old questions came to torment her. Had that been Charlie Reid she and Helen had seen on the station platform? Was that Reid in the lobby of the Tevor-Grand Hotel?

"If so, then there was the probability that the stealthy trailer would not leave them there. The chances were—and at the thought Ruth looked about her at the chattering excited crowds uneasily—he might be aboard that very ship, hidden somewhere in this sea of people!

The thought that Charlie Reid might even at that minute be spying upon her was so distasteful to Ruth that she made some excuse to Tom and hurried below to the cabin that she was to share with Helen.

It was a comfortable stateroom, for the steamer was a large one and boasted every modern convenience and comfort, but at the moment it seemed like a prison to Ruth.

She managed to shake off the unpleasant thought and replied to Helen's cheery greeting in kind.

That young person had kicked off her shoes and was luxuriously reclining on the bed reading a book she had purchased in Seattle. Beside her on a chair within easy reach of her groping fingers was a two-pound box of chocolates.

For just a moment Ruth thought that it would be nice to be like Helen, relieved of all responsi-

bilities and free to enjoy herself to her heart's content.

But even while she thought it Ruth knew that responsibility, excitement, and the thrill of outwitting an enemy and overcoming obstacles had become the breath of life to her and that she could never again be completely content without them.

"Hello, Ruth, you bold, bad adventurer," Helen greeted her flippantly. "Come here and share my couch and candy and tell me how the world goes with you."

"I'll share the candy but not the couch," Ruth laughed. "I have work to do."

"That is the chief—I might say, only—trouble with you, Ruth Fielding," complained her chum. "You always have so much work to do that you make me feel like the proverbial sluggard."

"Well, that's just what you are," said Ruth indulgently. "But I wouldn't have you change for the world. Why, it rests me just to look at you!"

"That," said Helen plaintively, "has all the earmarks of a dirty dig. But I forgive you, Ruthie—I am far too comfortable even to resent an insult!"

Ruth laughed and took out the picture Maurice Brandt had submitted to her, showing enlarged pictures of the interior scene shot at Hollywood.

But try as she would, she could not keep her mind upon them. Her thoughts returned again and again to the information she had gleaned from Todd.

Bloomberg in Alaska! Bloomberg in Alaska! beat a monotonous refrain over and over in her head.

"And fifteen nice long days to think about it!"

She did not realize that she had spoken aloud until she found Helen staring at her in amazement.

"For goodness' sake—to think about what?" inquired that flippant young lady. "Wake up, Ruthie, you've been talking in your sleep."

Of course, after that there was nothing to do but for Ruth to pass the news about Bloomberg along to her friend.

"Well," observed Helen, settling back comfortably to her story, "I wouldn't worry about it, if I were you. Alaska's a large place and we may not meet Bloomberg after all."

If Ruth had her doubts about this she very firmly kept them to herself. And as she saw nothing of Charlie Reid and no one mentioned Bloomberg's name again, the days on shipboard gradually settled into a pleasant, steady routine that temporarily lulled her fears to rest.

Every one seemed to be enjoying himself, and since there was to be no picture making until they

reached shore, there was little chance for friction between directors and actors.

Meanwhile, Ruth Fielding became better acquainted with the actors and came to feel that she was making some headway with them.

They were more friendly than they had been at first and no longer gathered in groups for the purpose, she could not help feeling, of discussing her.

So it happened that the fifteen days of journey to St. Michael which Ruth had looked upon as a tiresome, if necessary, delay to picture making, was not so unprofitable after all. The only two in the company who were not completely won by their new director's frank and friendly manner were Gerard Bolton, the assistant director, and the humpback, Rumph.

The former maintained his "have to be shown" attitude while Rumph was openly sullen and unfriendly.

In spite of this, Ruth was very much encouraged. With most of the company squarely back of her and Gerard Bolton not openly unfriendly, she could afford to snap her fingers at Joe Rumph. Or so she thought. But events were soon to prove that Ruth did not know Joe Rumph's type as well as she thought she did!

The trip was uneventful up to the fifth day, which was the day of the big storm.

The wind rose about dinner time and by nine o'clock had lashed itself to such a frenzy that the passengers left the spray-soaked decks almost in a body and sought the shelter of their cabins and their staterooms.

Even below decks the slapping of the waves against the vessel came to the passengers with an ominous, rumbling, roaring sound.

The wind increased in violence and the rain fell in great, blinding gusts that beat upon the decks with the violence of hailstones.

"Phew!" cried Helen, peeping out of a port-hole, "where do you suppose all that wind comes from?"

No one answered, for at that moment there came a rending, grinding noise and the great vessel listed sharply to one side. At the same moment came a stentorian cry from above decks, the most heart-rending cry that can be heard aboard ship!

"Man overboard!"

CHAPTER XIII

MAN OVERBOARD

For a moment there was pandemonium on the ship. No one seemed to know exactly what had happened, and shouts and cries rent the air as people blocked the stairs and companionways in a mad scramble for the deck.

Helen and Ruth were among the first to reach the deck, with Chess and Tom close behind them. There they were jostled by a seething mass of humanity and swept on toward the railing.

At the cry of "Man overboard" power had been shut off in the engine room. Fortunately the ship had been proceeding cautiously because of the storm, so that momentum carried it only a short distance from the scene of the accident.

Several lifeboats were lowered and rushed to the spot where life savers had already been thrown to the victim.

A small object was seen bobbing up and down on the water for several seconds and then disappeared.

"Oh, he will drown before they reach him!" cried Helen, putting a hand over her eyes.

"No," cried Ruth, gripping the rail till the knuckles of both hands showed white, "there he is again! See? One of the life preservers has reached him. He can hold on now."

"The boats are making good time," said Tom, behind her. "He's as good as rescued now."

"Wonder who it is," said Chess, and an obliging pleasant-faced man behind him volunteered the information:

"Old chap named Knowles. He was standing near the rail when we grazed the shoal——"

"Oh, so that's what we heard below decks!" cried Helen.

"Yes'm," said the stranger. "There was a grinding shock, if you remember, and this old boy was jarred loose from his hold on the rail and went overboard."

The passengers watched with interest while the first lifeboat reached the elderly victim and lifted him aboard. The men in the other boats, seeing that the work of rescue had already been accomplished, turned back toward the steamer.

"Poor old fellow," said Ruth commiseratingly. "The shock and the exposure are enough to kill an elderly man. I wonder," she added thoughtfully, "if I couldn't get him to take some of the

tonic I have in my medicine kit. It might ward off a serious illness."

Tom grinned.

"There's the Red Cross nurse on the job again," he said.

But Ruth did not smile with the others. She meant what she said, and when the lifeboat reached the ship and the victim was lifted to the deck, Ruth was one of the first at his side.

The ship's doctor was already at the spot, well-supplied with restoratives, and when Ruth begged him to let her help, saying that she had had experience in nursing with the Red Cross, the physician smiled indulgently and invited her to the old gentleman's cabin below.

Ruth ran for her favorite prescription, ignoring the good-natured rallying of her friends, and entered the old gentleman's cabin just as they had made him comfortable in his berth.

The doctor examined the label on the bottle Ruth held out to him and nodded approvingly.

"Haven't I met you somewhere before?" he asked, keen eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

The question surprised Ruth. But as she regarded the kindly, intelligent face of the physician, memory flashed back to her the vision of an emergency hospital somewhere back of the firing line; still figures on narrow cots of pain; soft-

footed, busy nurses; grim-faced, competent surgeons, tireless in their service to humanity.

"I was with the Red Cross in France," she suggested.

"Of course!" exclaimed the doctor. His manner was immediately cordial and he spoke as one member of the profession to another. "I have a fine memory for faces; but as to names—" He waved a deprecating hand. "Mr. Knowles is lucky in having so capable and willing a volunteer nurse," he finished pleasantly.

At the mention of his name, the old gentleman on the bed opened his eyes wearily. His gaze rested on Ruth and an expression of pleasure overspread his face.

"This is Miss Fielding, isn't it?" he asked, as Ruth came toward him hesitantly.

"Yes," she said, surprised. "How did you know?"

The old gentleman smiled.

"Your fame has probably traveled faster than you think, my dear," he said kindly. "A good many people are interested in the work you are doing."

So it happened that Ruth stayed longer than she had intended with Mr. Knowles and visited the cabin oftener. The more they talked the more subjects of mutual interest they seemed to discover.

The indulgent doctor, seeing what a beneficial effect the girl's presence was having upon his elderly patient, encouraged Ruth to visit him often and stay on and chat with him.

So started the friendship between Ruth and the lonely old man, a friendship that was destined to last throughout that long trip to St. Michael and for some time after, as well.

Mr. Knowles had received no serious injury from his fall overboard. The shock of the fall and the consequent exposure had to a large extent been counteracted by the prompt medical attention of the ship's doctor and by Ruth's careful nursing, so that in a day or two he was able to be on deck much the same as usual.

It was not until Ruth's friendship with the old gentleman was some four days old that she learned the history of the Chase girls.

The story must have been very close to the old gentleman's heart, for Ruth had several times sensed that he was on the point of making her his confidante.

On this particular occasion they were both chatting idly and pleasantly about some trivial amusing incidents that had happened aboard ship when the old gentleman turned to her suddenly and said:

"Miss Fielding, I am a lonely old man and I was wondering if you would mind my telling you

something that has worried me greatly for some time past."

Ruth felt surprised but professed her genuine interest in anything he might have to say to her.

"Thank you, my dear," he said gratefully, and for a moment his eyes sought the hazy horizon where it merged with the gray of the sea.

"If you were not going fairly into their territory, I might not tell you this," he said at last. "But since you are going there and because, being a girl, I feel that you may be interested in the troubles of two other girls nearly your own age, I would like to tell you about Mary and Ellen."

"Mary and Ellen," Ruth repeated softly. "How pretty they sound when you put them together, like the names in a story book."

"Their adventures would read like a story, too." The old man nodded, his face grave. "Only in real life these adventures are not so pleasant.

"These two girls," he went on after a short pause, "are the daughters of a very dear friend of mine. His name was Maurice Chase. As young men together, he and my son were practically inseparable, and later—later Maurice took the place of a son to me.

"It was only when his health failed and he was threatened with tuberculosis that he thought of going to Alaska, not only for his health's sake

but with some wild scheme for making his fortune in the gold fields."

"Lots of people have done that before him," said Ruth.

"Yes; but not middle-aged men with two nearly grown daughters to support, and with lung trouble to combat, too. It was an unequal fight, so unequal that death conquered after only two years of experiment in the gold fields."

"Oh, and so your friend is dead!" said Ruth, in a hushed voice. "And the girls—how about them?"

"It was about them that Maurice wrote me just before his death," replied Mr. Knowles. It was plain from the emotion in his voice that he and Maurice Chase had been very good friends indeed. "He had located a mine, he said——"

"Gold?" interrupted Ruth eagerly, leaning forward in her steamer chair.

"He thought there was gold," said the old man soberly. "And that one thought helped him," his voice trailed off almost to a whisper, "to die happy!"

CHAPTER XIV

KNOCKOUT INN

"Wasn't there gold in Mr. Chase's mine after all?" asked Ruth eagerly.

Mr. Knowles looked troubled and rubbed a blue-veined hand across his forehead.

"That's what I don't know and what I have come all this way to find out," he confessed.

He relapsed into one of his thoughtful pauses, and eager as Ruth was to hear the rest of this remarkable story she did not hurry him. She knew that eventually he would tell her everything, for he was even more eager to disclose the facts than she was to hear them.

"Mary herself wrote to me," he said, after a moment. "She wrote to tell me of her father's death and the fact that she and her sister Ellen were in desperate trouble."

"How old are they?" Ruth interrupted long enough to ask.

"Mary has just come of age," returned the old gentleman. "She seems to be a sturdy,

courageous young person, however, and from her letter to me it appears she is following in the footsteps of her father, and with her younger sister Ellen and with the help of three miners who were friends of her father, is trying to operate the mine herself."

"Are the girls all alone—are they living alone?" asked Ruth breathlessly.

"Yes. But that is not the worst of it," said Mr. Knowles. He sat up straight and his thin face flushed with indignation. "These two plucky children—for they are hardly more—have enemies, wicked conniving enemies, who are plotting to get the mining claim away from them."

"Ah!" Ruth's eyes were bright. "Then that at least seems to show one thing!"

"What?" asked the old gentleman, in a puzzled way.

"That there is real gold on the claim. Otherwise these enemies, whoever they are, would not be so anxious to get hold of it!"

"Yes, I have thought of that," said Mr. Knowles, and he had never looked so pathetically helpless as at the moment when he made that admission. "But even though there is gold in the mine, that will do the girls little good if their enemies succeed in taking it away from them before I get there.

"And after all," he added, with a pitiful shrug

of his shoulders, "what can an old man like me do against such villains as these probably are? I know nothing of mines or of the laws of the Yukon country. A sorry protector the girls will find in me, I fear, even when I have reached them."

Though Ruth tried to encourage the old gentleman and reassure him as well as she could, in her heart she was convinced that he had spoken very near the truth. An unworldly, gentle, dreaming old man, no matter how kind-hearted and desirous of serving, could probably avail little against the cold-blooded, hardened type of pioneer buccaneer who would deliberately attempt to wrest a lawful claim from two orphaned and defenseless girls.

What Mary and Ellen Chase undoubtedly needed was a young and virile defender, preferably one acquainted with the ways of the gold country and so would be best qualified to cope with the kind of pirates these poor young things were facing.

Mr. Knowles did not again refer to the story during the trip. Ruth told the sad story to Helen, who expressed the hope that they would run into the unfortunate girls during their own adventures and perhaps be able to do something to help them.

Then came the day when the travelers could actually look forward to landing within a few

hours at St. Michael. At that disturbing center they were to take a smaller steamer for points up the Yukon.

Their ultimate destination was Knockout Point, a little settlement not far from Dawson City. This was the spot Ruth had chosen for the filming of the greater part of the picture. It would form, she thought, a splendid setting full of local color for the main outdoor scenes of "The Girl of Gold." If she found it necessary later to take steamer for the filming of some scenes farther up the river, that all could be arranged for in due time.

Meanwhile, Knockout Point was their appointed destination.

Good connections were made at St. Michael. The small steamer on which Tom had taken passage for his party was almost ready to leave as the great liner docked.

Their quarters aboard the smaller ship were not as commodious as those they had enjoyed aboard the liner. But once aboard, no one cared particularly, since the longest part of the journey was now over and their destination almost in sight.

The one thing Ruth regretted was that, in the excitement of landing, she had lost sight of her elderly friend, Mr. Knowles. She thought of him constantly during the rest of the trip and won-

dered what his ultimate destination really was.

Then, a few days later, came the great moment when they all gathered on deck to watch the approach to Knockout Point. As the steamer plied steadily up the broad river, the excitement of players, cameramen, and directors grew.

It seemed as though Ruth was everywhere at once, exhorting cameramen to make sure that precious films and cameras reached shore safely, seeing that every one had packed and was ready for the landing.

Knockout Point was a straggling settlement, extending along the bank of the broad Yukon for a quarter of a mile or more. It had several docks, one about ready to fall apart, and a dusty, straggling main street of one and two story buildings. It had, in years gone by, gained its name from a fierce fight between a gold hunter and a desperado of that vicinity, in which the desperado had gotten the worst of the combat.

"Doesn't look much like New York, does it?" remarked Chess.

"New York!" cried Helen. "Why, it can't compare with—with Cheslow!"

"Some pretty high mountains in the background," went on the young man.

"Yes, and they look grand, don't they? I suppose we'll do some mountain climbing while we are here."

Ruth thought of and wondered about Mary and Ellen Chase. She wished she had asked Mr. Knowles more about them. The old gentleman had not said in just what part of Alaska their mine was located, except that it was near Snow Mountain.

However, he had known that her destination was Knockout Point and had mentioned the possibility of her meeting with these unfortunate girls. Was Snow Mountain and the property of Mary and Ellen Chase, then, somewhere in the neighborhood of Knockout Point?

Unable to answer the question to her satisfaction, Ruth was sorry that she had not found more time to spend with the old gentleman during the last days of the trip. He had seemed so lonesome and bewildered and troubled! If only she had found out definitely the location of the Chase mine, she or Tom or some of the rest of them might have found a way to help the girls and the old gentleman at the same time.

Well, it was too late now! They had reached the dock and from that time on other and more important duties claimed her attention.

Tom was bargaining with an evil-looking person, whose huge mustache and overhanging eyebrows seemed to Helen to proclaim him a desperado of the worst sort, an opinion she confided in an undertone to Ruth.

The name of this dangerous-looking individual was Sandy Banks, and the girls were later to learn that the only fierce part of Sandy was his appearance. In reality he was the simplest and gentlest of men, always ready to do a service for his fellow men, and an ardent admirer and champion of all women.

When Tom presented him to Ruth and Helen, this gallant cavalier bent low over the hand of each of them, his mustache sweeping upward in a grand and impressive manner.

Helen suppressed a giggle. But Ruth only smiled, for she had seen the simple friendliness in the eyes of this great hulking fellow and knew at once just what type of man he was.

Besides, her mind was working busily along professional lines. This Sandy Banks would contribute excellent local color to her picture if he could be persuaded to act for a day or two as an extra. Ruth stowed this thought away in a corner of her brain to be brought forward again when the time was ripe.

Meanwhile Sandy readily agreed to transport the motion picture company and its paraphernalia to Knockout Inn, where Tom had already telegraphed ahead for reservations.

"You purty nigh scairt Slick Jones into his grave," said their new acquaintance, with a deep-chested chuckle. "You come near fillin' up his

hull place—which ain't worryin' Slick none, since he leaves nigh onto every cent he kin scrape together down to The Big Chance. Well, sir, where do you want them things stowed?"

Tom gave instructions in regard to the trunks and other luggage, but the cameramen decided to carry their precious cameras with them.

"So far from home it ain't any use taking chances with them, Miss Fielding," said Schultz, with a grin.

Finding that Knockout Inn was not far from the river front, they all determined to walk, leaving only the luggage to Sandy Banks' rattling old wagon and dispirited horse.

So they filed along behind this equipage, keeping at a safe distance from the dust flung up by its wheels, quite willing that Sandy should take the lead and that he should proceed as slowly as possible. It was glorious to be on land again after the long ship journey, and every one was in high spirits. Every one, that is, except the dwarf who brought up the rear in a sort of sulky isolation, seeming like a dark blot upon the gayety of the party.

They found Knockout Inn a typical settlement building, a long low, one-story structure with more sheds and outhouses than there was building itself.

The proprietor came out to meet them in per-

son as Sandy drew his horse to a standstill before the door. The motion picture company straggled up, feeling, and perhaps looking, like a band of gypsies on the trail.

There was a smile on the habitually doleful countenance of Slick Jones and his hair, black and sleek, brushed straight back from a rather low and bulging forehead, shone with unusual brilliance. Slick was famous among his neighbors for this style of hair dressing, for no matter how careless the rest of his attire might be, Slick's hair was always sleek and polished like a piece of patent leather.

"Glad to meet you!" he said now, with a manner that was evidently intended to match his hair. "My place ain't much on looks, but I'm aimin' to make it comfortable. Sandy, there! Step lively, my lad. This way, ladies and gents! This way!"

CHAPTER XV

A BOTTOMLESS PIT

ONCE within the big bare room assigned to her and Ruth, Helen gave vent to joyful giggles.

"Ruth, this is too rich," Helen gurgled. "It's better than any circus I was ever at. Within half an hour of landing we meet both a desperado and a confidence man."

"Only Sandy Banks isn't a desperado," said Ruth, reaching eagerly for a pitcher of cold water. "And unless I'm very much mistaken, our friend Slick Jones is far from being a confidence man."

"Ruth, how can you be so trusting!" Helen removed her hat and coat and rather gingerly hung them on a row of rusty hooks along the wall that seemed to be all the closet the room contained. "Didn't you hear Sandy say that Slick gambled? And then, look at his name, Slick Jones!"

"From his hair," said Ruth, sputtering as she dashed cold water all over her face and neck. "My, this feels good! Better try some, Helen."

"Come on in, the water's fine," sang that young lady, as she tossed a glove toward the dresser and missed. "I'll do that thing in just a minute, Ruthie. But first I must roam about this palatial room so that I may fully appreciate all its beauties and conveniences."

"Now you're making fun," laughed Ruth, as she scrubbed her cheeks to a healthy red glow. "You mustn't expect all the conveniences and luxuries of home at Knockout Point."

"One oughtn't to expect much at Knockout Point," said Helen, with a chuckle. "Sounds kind of ominous, doesn't it, Ruthie? Knockout Inn at Knockout Point! Lucky if we get off without a knockout blow as well."

"Oh, you're horrid!" Ruth reproached her. "If anybody gets a knockout blow it will be Knockout Point. I can tell you that!"

"All right, Ruthie, if you say so," said Helen, throwing a kiss toward her chum. "I've come to believe that sometimes, most generally, you mean just what you say!"

When they were rested and refreshed the two girls decided to go on a short tour of exploration. They had promised to meet Chess and Tom outside the inn, but they were consumed with a great curiosity to see the interior of this unusual place first.

The house followed the very simplest style of

architecture within as without. There was one long hall running the full length of the building, with rooms opening off both sides of it.

On one side were the sleeping apartments, on the other, the living quarters. These the girls sauntered through and found them, with the exception of the large living room, as bare and as guiltless of ornament as the sleeping rooms.

There was a big dining room with two long rough-hewn tables, stretching from end to end of it. With the exception of the tables and chairs the room held no furniture save a huge, old-fashioned sideboard that must have been a hundred years old.

"Wonder how that got here," said Helen, pointing to this last curiosity. "I bet that thing is worth real money."

"Not to me," laughed Ruth. "I never saw anything half so ugly. But look, Helen," she opened the door to another room. "This isn't bad!"

They had entered the living room, the one apartment that presented any sort of homelike appearance. One end of the room was practically taken up by an immense fireplace. Some big, comfortable chairs were scattered about and in them were cushions that, while faded and worn, were immaculately clean

There was a long table in the center of the room on which were lying some old periodicals

and magazines that looked as faded and worn as the cushions in the chairs.

Some animal skins hung on the walls, effectually mitigating the bareness of the rafters, and rag rugs were flung over the rough, unvarnished floors. An oil lamp completed the furnishings.

As the girls advanced further into the room some one rose from the shadowy far corner of it and looked curiously at them. The newcomers were rather startled at the apparition since they had supposed the room to be empty and were glad when the stranger crossed to the hall and disappeared.

"One of our fellow guests at Knockout Inn," laughed Helen, as she and Ruth, arms about each other, sauntered out to the front of the house where they were to meet Tom and Chess.

There was not much to be done for the rest of that day except to wander about and become better acquainted with the immediate environs of their headquarters. On the morrow Ruth planned to start bright and early in search of locations.

There was nothing remarkable about Knockout Point. A half-abandoned settlement on the river front, with a few shabby stores, a few scattered houses hardly worthy of the name, an inn, namely Knockout Inn, and, set some distance back from its more respectable neighbors, a dance hall and gambling den called The Big Chance.

Naturally the girls and their escorts did not explore this latter place of amusement very thoroughly, although Ruth did think that on some future occasion she might be able to use it in her picture, provided, of course, the management consented.

But even the run-down appearance of the town in general could do nothing to ruin the scenic grandeur of the mountains in the background.

Snow Mountain, capped with ice all the year round and raising its proud crest high above its fellows, inspired the young people with awe. The crude and ramshackle buildings of Knockout Point seemed to them utterly out of place there, huddled at the base of the mountain and profaning the grandeur of the background.

"A wonderful spot for making pictures, Helen," Ruth murmured finally. "I can scarcely wait until to-morrow!"

They returned about dinner time to Knockout Inn to find an ample, if very simple, meal awaiting them.

There in the big bare dining room the moving picture company met for the first time since landing. In response to Ruth's questions it appeared that they were well satisfied with their new quarters (all save Joe Rumph, who merely glowered and said nothing) and that they were eager to

start the work of rehearsing as soon as their youthful director gave the word.

But in spite of their friendly attitude toward her, Ruth had again the uneasy sense that she was on probation, that before she was wholeheartedly accepted by them she must prove her ability to film a picture such as "The Girl of Gold."

"I'll show them!" thought Ruth valiantly. "To-morrow I will begin to prove to them exactly what I can do!"

With this determination well fixed in her mind, Ruth resisted all efforts on the part of Tom and the others to persuade her to take an after-dinner stroll with them.

"I must go up and look over the script and the book again, so as to have the story well in mind when I start to hunt locations in the morning," she told them. "From now on," she added, with a smile, "something tells me I am going to be a very busy girl!"

"You are always that, Ruth Fielding!" sighed Helen. "Well, come on, boys; no use trying to change her mind!"

In the morning Ruth went out bright and early, getting up before any one else and leaving a note of explanation for Helen.

Slick Jones, who, as was the case with Sandy Banks of the monstrous mustache, already felt a

boundless admiration for the youthful director, saw that she was served with a good breakfast, early as the hour was.

Ruth started off buoyantly on foot, convinced that the location for the taking of the first big outdoor scene ought to be found somewhere in the vicinity of Knockout Inn.

The first location decided upon, she could then take more time in exploring for others. Tom could do some of the scouting about for her and, knowing just what it was she wanted, could find locations that he thought would appeal to her.

The start would have been made. And as Ruth, in company with all other directors, knew, the start was almost as important as the finish. The first scene shot, the action continued on its own momentum.

Ruth raised her eyes to the white-capped peak of Snow Mountain lifting above the little settlement of Knockout Point, and on impulse Ruth set her feet toward it.

It was the pride of the natives, or so she had been informed by Sandy Banks the evening before. They even had a superstition about it. Snow Mountain guarded and protected all in its vicinity, so thought the simpler people of the Yukon. The nearer one lived to it, the more one could count upon good fortune!

"So the nearer I come to it," thought Ruth

whimsically, "the more certain I shall be of finding a good location!"

But to get nearer to the mountain was no easy task, as Ruth soon learned. In that rare atmosphere distances were deceptive, and the young motion picture director had to travel for an hour or more before she reached even the base of the mountain.

It was a hard, hot walk and she rested on a rock at the foot of the mountain before she started to climb the first of its several heights.

"My, I wish I had come on horseback," she sighed. "I'm footsore already. And then to think, I've got to walk all that way back!"

She had scarcely spoken the words when a mysterious and horrible thing happened. The solid ground beneath her feet seemed suddenly to give way and she felt herself sinking, sinking, into a bottomless abyss.

CHAPTER XVI

TRAPPED

THAT the abyss into which she had fallen was not bottomless at all, Ruth found out to her sorrow when she came down with a thump upon something that was extremely solid and very hard.

For a moment she was dazed and half stunned by the fall and sat where she had fallen, groping in bewilderment for some explanation of this phenomenon.

She had stumbled into some brushwood that must have pretty effectually hidden a hole of some sort. A bear trap, possibly. She had heard that they set traps of this sort for Bruin, covering a hole in the ground with a clever camouflage of twigs and leaves.

However, they would hardly set traps so near the settlement. Bears did not venture thus close to humanity as a rule.

Ruth shook herself impatiently. What did it matter how this awful thing had happened? The important thing was that it had and that she was

now faced with the necessity of getting herself out of the predicament as well as she could.

Very cautiously Ruth got to her feet. Groping with her fingers along the dirt walls of the hole into which she had fallen, she moved forward a step or two.

It was fearfully dark down there, and suddenly Ruth was conscious of a chilling terror.

Suppose this dark hole was the entrance to the cave of some animal? Suppose her fingers, groping in the darkness, were to touch, not the earth sides of the hole, but the fur or cold snout of some creature of the wild!

"Come, come, this will never do!" she said aloud, and gained some measure of assurance from the sound of her own voice. "There must be a way out of this. Perhaps I can get up again the way I came in!"

She looked up and saw far above her head a dim glimmer of light. Again that chill of horror shook her.

Impossible to scale the sheer sides of the hole without the aid of a rope in the hands of some one above.

"Oh, Tom, Tom, if I had only done what you begged me to and not started out alone in this country that is so strange to me! Oh, what shall I do? What can I do?"

With a great effort Ruth managed to control

her rising panic. In an emergency like this it would never do to lose her head. And, really, she had been been in much tighter places before.

She forced herself to think slowly and carefully.

It was evident that there was little chance of getting out of this place the way she had entered it. Then, too, there was little likelihood that a rescue party would be sent out after her for hours to come.

Her very independence and self-sufficiency, Ruth realized now a bit ruefully, might well prove her undoing. In her capacity of director she was accustomed to roaming around for hours alone in search of locations. So, until several hours had elapsed, no one would feel any particular alarm over her absence.

In such circumstances Ruth saw that she must, if she could, be her own salvation.

She could not go up, but there was a bare possibility that she might go forward.

"If I only had matches with me," she muttered beneath her breath. "As it is, I can't see a foot before my face!"

She groped forward again, and after feeling about cautiously for what seemed to her an endless time finally felt her hand slip forward into emptiness.

"A hole!" she thought, with transient triumph.

"Then there is some sort of passage leading from this place!"

However, it takes the highest form of courage to go forward, accompanied by pitch darkness, into an unexplored place. Even Ruth, valiant as she always was in the face of emergency, hesitated for a moment before this test of courage. Then——

"Carry on, Ruth," she said. "Better any known thing than this uncertainty!"

She did not really mean that. The cautious half of her begged that she stay where she was, for hours, if necessary, until the inevitable rescue party came to her aid, rather than venture into that black hole of mystery into which her hand had slid. But—would they be able to pick up her trail?

"I don't even know that I can get all of myself into that hole," she murmured, turning her thoughts resolutely to the present situation. She forced herself forward again and found that the aperture was large enough to admit her if she entered in a stooping posture.

There was one more moment of indecision. Then, like a swimmer prepared to plunge head-first into icy water, she gave a little gasp and entered the opening.

It was so narrow that her body grazed both sides of it as she groped slowly and painfully for-

ward. She was now in complete darkness. The air was heavy and devitalized, and Ruth found herself breathing with difficulty.

Ahead of her there came a faint and ominous sound—the staccato drop of pebbles on the earth floor of the tunnel.

That sound caught at Ruth's breath and for a moment she pressed a hand hard against her wildly beating heart.

Who knew at what moment the tunnel might cave in, burying her beneath a smothering weight of dirt and rock? Ruth knew that this was an actual and imminent peril.

She tried to turn with some vague idea in her mind of returning to the comparative safety of the place she had left.

But the movement of her shoulders against the sides of the tunnel brought with it such a terrifying rattle of stones that Ruth decided to push on at any cost.

"There must be an outlet somewhere!" she gasped sobbingly. "There must be! There must!"

All the time she knew that the chances were that the tunnel ended in a dead wall of dirt and rock. Any moment now her hand might touch a solid surface, showing that she had reached the farther end of the underground passage.

Still her hand groping ahead of her touched

nothing and she pushed on, panting, almost smothered, nearly exhausted.

"What a hideous, nightmare place!" she sobbed. "How could I have fallen into such a trap! How could I?"

Still she struggled on, losing all sense of time or distance, commanding her aching muscles to move automatically, convinced in a dazed, half-delirious sort of way, that she would never come to the end of this maddening tunnel because there *was* no end.

"Tom! Helen!" she kept muttering over and over, staggering, stumbling, falling to her knees and forcing herself to her feet again to stagger and stumble on. "I'll never see you again! Never! This is the end! I can't get out! I can't, I can't—I—can't——"

The words died out in a vague silence of utter incredulity. She must have gone out of her head. She must be mad at last.

There, before her, the faintest beckoning glimmer, was light!

CHAPTER XVII

A NIGHTMARE JOURNEY

RUTH FIELDING began to laugh and then to cry—her throat working convulsively.

She forced her exhausted muscles to action again, ran, stumbled, fell, and ran again, bruising arms and knees and shoulders without knowing, without caring!

"Light! Light!" she cried over and over again, her voice weird and smothered in that breathless place. "There is a way out. There is!"

But the beckoning light was cruelly deceptive. It seemed so near and yet appeared ever to recede as Ruth's eager hands groped toward it.

Several times she gave up the unequal struggle and sank to the ground, with all the strength gone from her limbs.

Then up again and on, sometimes crawling on hands and knees, sometimes struggling to an upright position and, by an almost superhuman effort holding to it, staggering onward—upward

—always toward that summoning, faint glimmer of light.

At last, to lie within an arm's throw of it, laughing, weeping, hysterical, panting with exhaustion.

Then crawling, inch by inch, painfully, groping toward that tiny aperture!

At last, face close to it, the pungent breath of the woods drawn deep down into aching lungs!

Ruth rested for a while, gathering her depleted forces for the last great effort, to drag herself up and through the opening.

Tired fingers groping, Ruth at last managed to gain a hold on the roots and soft dirt about the edge of the hole. But her strength was gone. The fearful knowledge came to her that she could not, unaided, draw herself out of that dreadful place. Her fingers were growing numb.

Suddenly the blue of the sky above her was blotted out. Still clinging to the edge of the hole with what little strength was left her, Ruth looked up.

A face was bending over her—the face of a girl on which was written surprise and horror.

"Oh, help me!" begged Ruth. "I can't hold on——"

"Give me your hand," commanded the girl briskly. "Hold on with one hand and try to help yourself while I pull. Here we go!"

There followed a heart-breaking moment of slipping and pulling when it seemed that they both must fall into the pit together.

But the strange girl was strong and Ruth was desperate. One last, hard pull, and Ruth found herself lying upon a bed of soft moss and sweet-scented flowers.

She lay for a moment, panting, trying to regain her strength. Her rescuer bent over her anxiously.

"Do you feel better?" asked the latter. "Can you—do you think you can walk?"

"Of course," returned Ruth, and struggled to her feet. She swayed unsteadily and was amazed to find how weak she was.

The strange girl put a slender, strong young arm about her shoulders and spoke with an air of quiet authority.

"You must come with me—please," she said. "Our cabin is only a short distance away. Look —there it is through the trees. There you can rest until you are stronger and can tell me just what has happened."

Ruth said no more, but allowed her new friend to lead her down a narrow path that led to a small cottage. It was the rudest kind of little dwelling, built, as even Ruth could see, by one who was an amateur at such work. A lonely enough place, Ruth thought, to house such a

pretty young creature as this girl who walked beside her.

As they neared the house Ruth saw another figure framed in the doorway.

Her new acquaintance must have followed the direction of her glance, for she said quickly:

"My sister. We live here together."

Ruth turned startled eyes upon the girl.

"Not alone?" she cried.

The girl nodded sadly.

"There is no one else since father died," she said, and Ruth could see the quick tears spring to her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Ruth felt as though she had unwittingly put her finger upon a throbbing wound.

She was glad that they had reached the house and so temporarily put an end to conversation.

She found the other sister younger and more immature than the one who had so luckily encountered her in the woods. She was a thin and gangling girl, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, and not, at first sight, so attractive as her sister. However, the younger sister had a sweet face, and, Ruth thought, gave promise of beauty later on.

The sisters led Ruth eagerly into the one main room of the cabin. Ruth was to learn later that there was a tiny sleeping apartment partitioned

off from this kitchen, dining room and sitting room combined.

They seemed pitifully pleased at having a visitor and hovered over her with such eagerness to serve that Ruth was quite won by them.

The older girl brought her a drink of refreshingly cold well water at once, which Ruth drank gratefully.

Then the sisters coaxed her to let them give her a cup of tea and perhaps a fried egg and a bit of bacon. But Ruth protested that she was not in the least hungry and only needed a short rest before she would be perfectly fit and able to start back to her friends.

"If you will show me the way," she added, with her bright friendly smile.

"Indeed we will. Although we would like so much to keep you with us." The younger of the two girls said this with a wistful tone and look. It was pathetic, too, Ruth thought, to see how the younger of the two girls leaned upon the strength and courage of the elder.

She was about to ask the sisters as tactfully as she could how it happened that they were alone in this remote place when the older girl forestalled her by asking a question of her own.

"If you don't mind telling me," she said gravely, "I'd like to know what happened to you

before I came along and helped you out of that hole."

"I fell into another hole!" said Ruth.

The sisters were mystified at that, and so Ruth explained the harrowing circumstances that preceded the fortunate discovery of her plight by this new friend.

The older girl listened with grave interest, while the younger interrupted often with eager questions.

The latter would have kept Ruth talking of her own affairs indefinitely, had not the young director adroitly switched the conversation to a subject which had aroused her curiosity.

"I don't want to appear to pry," she said, with her pleasant smile. "But I do feel that I owe a debt of gratitude to the young lady who helped me out of a very bad scrape indeed. And how am I going to express my gratitude," she added gayly, "when I don't even know the young lady's name?"

The older girl smiled at this—a slow, grave smile that seemed characteristic of her.

"I am sorry," she said. "We should have told you before. I am Mary Chase and this is my sister, Ellen."

CHAPTER XVIII

COINCIDENCE

For a minute Ruth sat staring at the girl, wondering whether she might believe the evidence of her ears.

"Did you say Mary Chase?" she queried finally. "Are you sure? Oh, I don't mean that, my dear!" she added quickly, as the faces of both girls expressed surprise and wonderment. "I was only thinking that my falling into that hole back yonder might have some purpose after all!"

The girls looked more bewildered than before and Mary said slowly:

"I don't believe we quite understand you."

"Of course you don't," replied Ruth, and drew her chair a little closer to the sisters. "Now listen, my dears, and I will tell you of an extraordinary coincidence."

While they listened in a wondering silence Ruth told them of her meeting with their father's friend, Mr. Knowles, and that he had explained to her a great deal concerning them, including

their fight with the rascals who were attempting to get hold of their property.

"It's wonderful—your knowing all about us!" said Ellen, in her eager, shy voice. "Then that makes us—" she hesitated, then finished with a blush at her boldness, "not really strangers after all."

"It ought to make us the best of friends," said Ruth heartily, and it struck at her warm heart to see how the two girls brightened at her words.

"Mr. Knowles has been here," Mary volunteered.

A look of doubt and sadness came into her eyes as she added:

"He is very good, but I'm afraid he won't be able to help us very much. He seemed more bewildered than we are when we tried to explain to him. I don't know—I don't know," in a half-whisper, as though she were speaking to herself, "what is going to become of us!"

Ruth leaned toward the girl impulsively.

"Don't you think you could trust me enough to tell me about it, Mary?" she said. "I don't know that I should understand any better than Mr. Knowles. But I should like to try."

"You are very good!" said Mary, reaching out a hand to Ruth.

"Indeed you are!" said Ellen. "It is so long,"

she added softly, "since we have had another woman to talk to."

"It is that man Lieberstein who is making all the trouble," said Mary, her face flushing with indignation as she mentioned the name of her enemy. "He says he located the claim before Dad did."

"Which is perfectly silly!" Ellen broke in swiftly. "He never came here until after Dad had taken out his papers and started to work the mine."

"Have you the papers?" asked Ruth quickly.

Mary looked nervously about her as though even then she was afraid of being spied upon.

"We have them, yes," she half-whispered, and for a moment there stole into her face a look of grim resolution that made her look many years older. "And we are going to keep them. One of us," with swift glance toward her sister, "is always awake when the other sleeps. We still have Dad's shotgun, you see," she added swiftly.

"You see we are trying to work the mine ourselves," Ellen volunteered. She spoke as casually as though operating a mine were an ordinary occupation for young women of sixteen and twenty-one. "Old Eddie Jones is trying to help us, and two other miners that used to be friends of father's."

"We would do very well, too," said Mary

quickly, and Ruth liked the determined gleam in her eyes, "if it wasn't for that old cave-in. We have to dig down through a lot of dirt and rock before we can reach gold. It's pretty slow going," she added simply, "if you haven't the right kind of equipment."

Ruth frowned with quick pity. She was silent for a moment, thinking deeply.

"You are afraid this man, Lieberstein, will get hold of your father's papers and then lay claim to the mine?" she asked.

"Yes; and he will do it if he can," returned Mary. "When we both have to be away from the cabin we leave one of the old prospectors here to guard the papers."

"Just what have you to prove your claim?" asked Ruth.

"A map of the mine and signed papers proving that Dad was really the one who staked the claim," said Mary. "We keep them all in—" she paused while the slow color flooded her face.

Ruth never knew how near Mary had come to revealing the secret to her of the real hiding place of her dead father's precious papers. But Mary suspected Max Lieberstein, and so was suspicious of every one else. Now, to cover her confusion, she said, with a grim little smile:

"You see, if we lose the papers we lose every-

thing. And that's why we keep Dad's shotgun always handy!"

"Who is this Lieberstein, anyway?" asked Ruth suddenly. "Where does he come from?"

"Dawson City," answered Ellen.

"I wish he were back there now!" cried Mary, speaking with a swift, passionate rush of words. "I wish I had some way of sending him back so that he would never, never dare come here again!"

"He is close by, then?" It was more a statement than a question.

Mary nodded.

"He stays at The Big Chance at Knockout Point," she said.

"The Big Chance is run by a new man," Ellen contributed, with apparent irrelevance. "His name is Sol Bloomberg."

Ruth rose from her chair so swiftly that it overturned and went clattering on the bare board floor. She caught Mary by the shoulders and shook her, scarcely knowing what she did.

"Sol Bloomberg!" she cried. "Proprietor of The Big Chance! Oh, this is too much! I can't believe it!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE DWARF

For the second time within an hour the Chase girls looked alarmed at Ruth's vehemence. Seeing their bewilderment, Ruth strove to collect herself and to dissemble her dismay at this new and startling bit of information.

Slowly she picked up the overturned chair and reseated herself. Her hands shook as she clasped them tight in her lap and her face was white.

"Sol Bloomberg running The Big Chance! I might have guessed it before. I should have inquired——"

"But why do you care that Sol Bloomberg is running The Big Chance?" Mary Chase inquired, puzzled. "I wish Ellen had not told you!"

"Oh, no, no! It's all right," said Ruth hastily, forcing her stiff lips to smile. "I happen to be acquainted with Bloomberg, that's all; and if this is the same man, I certainly know little good of him."

"He is a bad man!" Ellen burst out with almost

childish fury. "I have heard that he cheats at cards, but he does it so cleverly that nobody can catch him in the act. He is a bad man, and I think he wants our claim as much as Lieberstein —and maybe more!"

"Hush, Ellen! You should not say such things unless you know," cautioned Mary, but the younger sister persisted stubbornly.

"I can't see any harm in saying what one believes," she protested. "Bloomberg is a bad man and I hate him as much as I do Lieberstein."

Ruth had been watching the girl with an intent interest. Now she rose quickly from her chair.

"You may be right, my dear," she said. "Anyway, I thank you for what you have told me, and for what you, Mary, have done for me, and I will try to help you both as much as I possibly can."

"Oh, but you are not going so soon?" cried Ellen. "I thought perhaps you might stay and keep us company for a little."

"No, I must go back now!" Ruth spoke quickly, almost feverishly. With Bloomberg in the neighborhood she had the instinct to return to her company as quickly as possible. "I will come to see you again as often as I can and speak to friends about you, and you must come and watch us sometimes at our work."

"Work!" they cried.

"What kind of work do you do?" added Mary.

Ruth saw that she would not be able to get away without some sort of explanation, so she wisely compromised.

"Show me to the road and point out my way back to Knockout Point," she said, "and I will explain to you about my work as we go."

As the road was near and nothing could possibly happen in the little time they would be away from the cabin, both the Chase girls accompanied Ruth.

"Oh, will you let us come and watch you some time if we can find some one to stay at the cabin while we are away?" asked Ellen, the words stumbling over each other in her eagerness, after the tale was told.

"Of course," said Ruth, putting her arm about the younger girl. "As soon as we start to take the first picture you may sit on the fence—provided there is one!—and watch to your heart's content."

Ellen sighed with complete happiness at the prospect, and even Mary's troubled eyes brightened.

"If I could only act in the moving pictures just once I think I should die happy," said Ellen. "I would even—forgive Lieberstein!"

Ruth laughed at that extravagance, and then they found that they had reached the road.

The girls were sorry over the prospect of parting with their new-found friend. But Ruth was on fire to get back to Knockout Point, to tell Tom what she had heard about Bloomberg.

"It's a long way back to the river front," said Mary. "It would be a long tramp, even for some one who is used to walking——"

"Well, I'm that some one—" Ruth was beginning when Ellen interrupted.

"Look there!" she cried, pointing to a cloud of dust that appeared in the distance. "Dust means horsemen. Some one is coming this way——"

"And coming fast!" finished Ruth hopefully.

Horsemen meant the possibility of a lift back to Knockout Point, or at least the conveying of a message there to her friends. Ruth was still weak from her terrible experience in the tunnel and the prospect of a long walk along an unknown road had not appealed to her as much as she had been pleased to pretend.

"If it's Lieberstein—" Mary was beginning when an exclamation of sheer joy from Ruth clipped the sentence short.

Ruth started running down the middle of the road toward the horsemen at the imminent peril of being run down by them.

"Tom! Chess!" she shrieked. "Oh, I never was so glad to see any one in my life!"

Tom and Chess reined in their horses sharply

and swung to the ground. It was then that Ruth saw the identity of the third rider.

"Mr. Boardman!" she cried. "It was good of you to come! I suppose," looking at Tom's white, drawn face, "that this is a sort of rescue party?"

"Thank goodness it was successful," said Tom, and took Ruth's outstretched hand in a grip that hurt. "We've just about had heart failure!"

"Been standing on our heads for the last two hours," Chess corroborated. "Thought you were gone for good this time, Ruth."

"What happened?" asked Tom, regarding the girl closely. "Have you been running into danger again, Ruth?"

"I've been falling into holes—or rather a hole!" retorted Ruth, making light of her adventure. "But by good luck I managed to stumble out again. I'm all right now, thanks to that same good luck—and Mary Chase!"

Ruth turned to the two girls. They had retreated to the side of the road and were looking on, Mary gravely, Ellen with a shy interest at this meeting between Ruth and her friends.

Ruth made the introductions in a laughing manner that helped to put the two girls at their ease, and before she rode away with Tom and Chess and Layton Boardman, Ruth made the two sisters promise that they would get one of the

friendly old miners to take charge of the mine and the cabin long enough for them to run down once or twice and watch motion pictures in the making.

As the two girls turned to go Ruth was surprised and amused to catch a look of admiration in the eyes of Layton Boardman as they rested upon the elder of the Chase girls.

She spoke of this to Tom as she rode before him in the saddle.

"Did you see Layton Boardman look at Mary?"

"Which was Mary?" asked Tom indifferently. At the moment he was so glad to get Ruth back safe that all the Marys in the world held small interest for him.

"The older girl—the tall one, you know, with the grave face," Ruth explained. "Our actor looked at her as if he really saw her. And since he is such a woman hater, you must admit that's unusual."

"I admit nothing of the sort," Tom laughed. "Even a cat can look at a king!"

"Only this time it happened to be a queen," said Ruth, with a chuckle.

She fell silent after that, trying to recall all that Mary Chase and her sister Ellen had told her about Max Lieberstein and Sol Bloomberg.

Was it true, as the two girls seemed to think,

that these rascals were working together to get the Chase claim for themselves? If so, Ruth vowed that she would defeat Sol Bloomberg, and Lieberstein, too.

Busy days followed for Ruth, days of rush and strain that sometimes found her tired out and depressed, sometimes jubilant and confident of the success of her great undertaking.

They found suitable locations in plenty in and about Knockout Point. In fact, their chief embarrassment seemed to be in the matter of selecting the best. It was an embarrassment of riches.

Setting about her work with her usual vim and enthusiasm, Ruth gradually won the confidence of her company. It needed only the filming of the first big outdoor scene, with Ruth here and there and everywhere at once, commanding, directing, coaching, to prove to them her unusual directing ability.

Even Gerard Bolton, the skeptical, was convinced, and from that time on became one of Ruth's most loyal and enthusiastic supporters.

There were only two flies in Ruth's ointment of content. But they were enough to keep her constantly on the anxious seat.

The first and perhaps the most annoying, was Sol Bloomberg of The Big Chance, whom she

had found to be in truth her old enemy and the author of those threatening letters.

The fact that he had as yet made no move to hinder her in the work of picture-making reassured Ruth not at all. She knew Bloomberg and his talent for disguising his true purpose until the moment came to strike.

Ruth felt that sooner or later he would aim a deadly blow at her. She had no defense, since she could not possibly tell from what angle he would strike.

The second fly, also an annoying one, was Joe Rumph, the dwarf.

His original unfriendly feeling toward Ruth had been fanned into a flame of enmity by her decision to tone down the part he had to play in several different scenes of the picture.

Mr. Hammond had told her to use her judgment in all such matters. So when Ruth thought that the story would be stronger and more interesting without too much display of the dwarf's atrocious ugliness, she said so—always, of course, in a mild and tactful way.

Then one day on the lot when they were getting ready to shoot the last of a series of several scenes, matters came to a climax between Ruth and the actor.

For some time past Rumph had been "hogging" some of Boardman's best scenes, insisting on re-

taining the limelight when he should long since have been a victim to the "fade-out."

Ruth had spoken to him several times about this, and the last time her voice was sharp with annoyance. The scene had been going excellently, and if Rumph had kept to his place would undoubtedly have been one of the best in the series.

As it was he bid fair to spoil all her work and possibly a good many feet of expensive film.

Ruth was more patient and long-suffering than most directors, who often "go up in the air" at the slightest provocation. But when Rumph insolently ignored her instructions again, even her patience gave way beneath the strain.

"Mr. Rumph," she said, going close to the actor and speaking very quietly, "I would like you to understand that as long as I am director here, you are to do exactly as I say."

"And if you are to remain director here," said Joe Rumph with calm insolence, "then I don't care to act any longer under your direction."

"Then go!" cried Ruth. "Your resignation is accepted. If you care to, you may leave to-day. Mr. Cameron will settle with you," and Ruth turned at once to the script she held in her hand.

CHAPTER XX

A VICIOUS ENEMY

It is probable that the other actors of Ruth's company were as much startled by this ultimatum as Joe Rumph himself. The dwarf had become so accustomed to thinking of himself as being invaluable to Ruth in the making of her picture that her easy acceptance of his threat to leave came as an unpleasant surprise to him.

He stared at Ruth as if doubtful whether or not to believe his ears. He started to speak, thought better of it, and with a horrible frown on his heavy-featured face, turned and stalked off the "lot."

Tom, who had been watching the scene with clenched fists, ready to chastise Rumph if his manner became too offensive, hurried up to Ruth.

"It's all right, Tommy-boy," she said quickly and so softly that no one else could hear. "I've been just waiting for this chance. I'm so happy

that he gave me the opportunity. Now you just watch me!"

She called to Carlton Brewer, the actor who had played the chum of the hero and who, in Ruth's estimation, possessed unusual acting ability.

With a wave of her hand she summoned Abe Levy, the make-up man, and the three drew a little aside from the others, talking eagerly and earnestly.

"Can you do it?" Ruth asked at last of Levy. "Can you make him into the kind of cripple who will arouse a sort of reluctant sympathy from the audience even in his villainies but that will not shock their sensibilities by a too-hideous deformity?"

"Can I!" retorted Levy, with all the enthusiasm of a genuine artist. "You watch me, Miss Fielding! You just keep your eye on me! If I don't turn out the finest hunchback you ever saw inside of half an hour, then my name ain't Abe Levy and I'm here to tell the world about it!"

Carlton Brewer stepped close to Ruth. It was evident that he was deeply moved and was finding it difficult to express what he felt.

"I can't tell you what it means to me, Miss Fielding," he said gruffly. "This chance to prove that I'm something besides a glorified extra. I'll

make good if it's in me—and that's a promise!"

Ruth's smile was radiant.

"I know it's in you!" she cried. "That's part of my business—to judge men—and I've been watching you very closely, Mr. Brewer. I've an idea that you know Joe Rumph's part better than he knows it himself!"

Brewer grinned, a boyish disarming grin that made him very attractive.

"Of course *I* think I could play it much better!"

Ruth's eyes gleamed and she laughed exuberantly.

"Prove it!" and with a wave of her hand consigned him to the care of the make-up man.

"Attention, everybody!" she cried, returning to the scene. "We'll rehearse that scene again, leaving out temporarily the part of the villain. Mr. Boardman, please! Miss Lytelly, you have just stumbled upon your lover in the clearing. He is unconscious. You think he is dead. You are forgetful of your own danger. You forget everything as you turn his face so that you may see it! Can you cry? Good! Everybody ready?"

The scene was enacted not once but several times, and each time Ruth criticized one point or another and changed this or that, until she had it exactly as she desired.

"Now then, do it just like that," she cried at last. She looked at the two cameramen who were doing the shooting. "Ready?" And as they nodded, she threw up her hand. "Ready? Go!" And then the cameras clicked and the much-rehearsed scene was recorded on the strips of film.

At the end Ruth felt a light touch on her arm and found Edith Lang beside her. Tears were streaming down the face of the temperamental actress, but her face was wreathed in smiles.

"Fine! Excellent!" she cried. "It takes a clever actress to make me weep. But you, my dear Miss Fielding, you bring out the best that is in us. You stir the imagination, the emotions, like skilled fingers on the sensitive strings of a harp. You are wonderful, wonderful, my dear Ruth Fielding. I have never worked under a director just like you."

Athrill with a fine elation, Ruth turned and grasped the actress' hands in both her own.

"And to-morrow comes your own big act!" she cried. "The most dramatic, the climactic scene of the play. I am looking forward to that!"

"And I!" said Edith Lang softly.

It was only after the day's work was done that Ruth's mood became a little less exuberant.

She and Tom were walking slowly toward the inn, both thoughtful and unusually quiet.

"That was a bold move of yours," Tom said gravely—"sending Joe Rumph away."

"He resigned," Ruth countered. Then as Tom made no remark: "Just the same, I am sure I did the right thing, Tom."

"So am I, as far as the filming of the play is concerned," Tom replied loyally. "I ought to know enough to trust your judgment by this time, Ruth. It isn't that. I was just thinking that Joe Rumph might make an unpleasant enemy."

"Oh, Tommy," Ruth was suddenly weary and plaintive, "haven't we enough enemies, already? Please, please, don't borrow trouble—or a new enemy!"

Still, had Ruth known that at that very moment Joe Rumph was in converse with a deadly enemy of hers she might have thought a little more concerning Tom's warning.

There were three of them in the private back room of The Big Chance—Sol Bloomberg, characteristically chewing on a great black cigar, a man named Max Lieberstein and Joe Rumph.

"We ought to be able to pull it off, the three of us together," the latter was saying, heavy brows drawn down over smoldering eyes.

"Yeah! Kill two birds with one stone!" Bloomberg spoke with relish. "We'll spoil Ruth Fielding's picture for her and oust those Chase

girls at the same time. Real gold in that mine, eh, Max?"

Lieberstein grinned evilly.

"So much gold there is there, Sol, you an' me ain't got no call to worry the rest of our lives yet. Easy, Sol, easy! Like taking candy from a baby!"

Which was exactly what it was!

Everybody was present to see Edith Lang in her big scene. Mary and Ellen Chase had left their cabin with Eddie Jones as guard long enough to come down and watch the work of picture taking.

There was another little romance in progress, too, that had nothing to do with the making of motion pictures, and both Ruth and Helen were watching it from one side with truly feminine pleasure and interest.

To-day Helen pressed her chum's arm as Ruth was passing and said softly:

"Look over there, Ruth," pointing to where Layton Boardman, a handsome and romantic-looking figure, was talking earnestly to Mary Chase. There was a look in his eyes that was plain for all to read. "Our cowboy friend has fallen head over ears at last!"

Ruth laughed and her eyes softened as she saw the trusting look in Mary's pretty, upturned face.

"Layton Boardman will wake up now, if he

never has before," she said softly. "And, Helen dear, I am so glad. Poor Mary Chase needs a protector if ever girl did in this world!"

This was the day of Edith Lang's big scene, and all were agog with interest. The company were all fond of the actress personally, and even the stars of the play never thought to be jealous of her ability.

Miss Lang herself was strung up to acting pitch and feverishly eager for her big moment.

There was some preliminary work to be done before Miss Lang appeared on the scene, but having rehearsed this thoroughly the day before, Ruth gave orders to start work at once.

Everything went beautifully up to the entrance of Edith Lang.

"Now, Miss Lang!" cried Ruth excitedly. "You come on the scene just as the villain—Carlton Brewer in the rôle this time and a perfect example of the marvelous deception of which Levy and a cameraman are capable—just as the villain is in the act of jumping the claim staked off by your daughter the day before. Because she is ill, you have come in her place to protect your property. Panting, exhausted, almost fainting, you still defy the thief— Right! Fine!— He starts to run—you get in his way— Good! Good!— He grapples with you—his fingers are about your throat— You feel yourself choking—

Desperate, fainting, your groping fingers rest upon something hard— Good!— His gun— You draw it forth— You——"

Her voice trailed off and with incredulity and anger she stared at the cameramen.

"Go on!" she cried frantically. "Don't stop here! Can't you see you are ruining the film?"

Bert Traymore shook his head despairingly and his face puckered up as though he were about to cry.

"No use, Miss Fielding. Some one has been tampering with the magazines and cut off several hundred feet of film!"

Ruth experienced a moment of physical sickness. Edith Lang's big scene had been ruined, the morale of her company seriously threatened, and all for the loss of a few hundred feet of film!

Of course the scene could be shot again, Miss Lang could undoubtedly work herself up to "acting pitch" again, but for that day at least no more could be expected of her.

Meanwhile her company had gathered about her in consternation. Edith Lang was almost in tears with vexation and the sudden shift of her emotions. Bert Traymore was standing staring at his camera with a bewildered, hang-dog expression that at any other time would have appealed to Ruth's sense of humor. For a cameraman to come off for a day's work with an insufficient

amount of film in his magazines is an offense that ordinarily costs him his position. Atwater, who had been grinding his machine from another angle, was in a like situation.

In this case Ruth was not inclined to be too hard on the jovial Traymore and his comrade. She was not forced to hunt very far or very long for the origin of this tampering. Bloomberg, with his allies, had evidently started on the campaign of obstruction. This, Ruth felt, was only the first of a long series of annoyances.

She carried off the situation as well as she could. Traymore and Atwater were let off with a warning to examine their magazine boxes more carefully in the future and to be sure hereafter that they had the required length of film before starting out on a day's work.

Of course there was a good deal of gossip among the actors, but Ruth told them nothing concerning her suspicions.

With her own intimate friends she was hardly more communicative. Though Helen and Tom were wrathful over the episode and Chess sympathetic, Ruth made scarcely any comment.

"I've been expecting something of the sort," was all she would say. "From now on I can see that this thing is going to be a fight between me and Bloomberg, and I've got to conserve my forces to win."

After a period of concentrated thought Helen looked at Ruth oddly.

"Do you know, Ruth Fielding," she said, "I have been thinking a lot lately about our old friend, Charlie Reid."

Ruth's glance tacitly requested her to go on.

"I have a feeling that we were right when we suspected Charlie of following us. Or perhaps he wasn't really following us, but was coming out here to join Bloomberg at The Big Chance. He probably found out all he wanted to know in New York about you and your new agreement with Mr. Hammond."

"But we haven't even caught a glimpse of him here," protested Ruth. "Aren't you rather jumping at conclusions, Helen?"

"Perhaps," replied Helen, with a shrug of her shoulders. "But you mark my words, Ruth. I'll wager about anything I own that Charlie Reid will flash into the picture sometime before we leave Knockout Point for good."

"Maybe you're right," said Ruth, with a troubled frown. "Bloomberg would almost certainly stay at a safe distance and make use of a tool, and Charlie Reid certainly seems to have the bad-penny habit of always turning up just when you want him least!"

Ruth worked hard in the days that followed, and in her haste there was a suggestion of panic.

Every scene that was shot without the interference of Bloomberg she counted that much gained. Every morning when she awoke her heart sank with the thought that perhaps this was the day Bloomberg had chosen to strike. For that he intended to strike she had not the slightest doubt.

Several unexplained accidents occurred, slight in themselves but serving to annoy and irritate actors and directors alike and to cause considerable delay and money loss.

There was the time, for instance, when the make-up man found his pet jar of yellow grease paint missing just as he was making up the extras for a big outdoor scene.

The boy actor, Eben Howe, came to Ruth in a state of great excitement.

"Say, Miss Fielding, I bet I know who run off with that grease paint," he said, his eyes fairly starting out of his freckled face. "I saw Joe Rumph sneakin' around the place just yesterday. I'd know that crooked back anywhere. But when I called out to him, just friendly like, he give me a dirty look and beat it. I bet it was him," came with all the gravity of the youthful detective, "was after that yellow paint!"

"Probably he thought it would improve his beauty, Eben," Tom laughed.

But when the boy had gone, Tom and Ruth exchanged glances.

"So Rumph is in this, too," she said slowly. "They're pressing us pretty hard, Tom!"

"Now don't worry," Tom tried to reassure her. "If they don't do anything worse, we'll be lucky."

"Yes!" said Ruth. *"If* they don't!" and Tom did not miss the emphasis on the "if."

But despite the worries and setbacks, they came to a time when all the big exterior scenes had been shot. At a few of the locations Mary and Ellen Chase had been present, though it was not often that they could leave their work at the mine nor dared to relax their guard of the cabin, even when they left one of the three miners in charge.

In those days Ruth came upon unexpected proof that she had not been wrong in her conviction that Layton Boardman really admired the elder of the Chase girls.

The actor talked to her whenever he had a chance, and once Ruth came upon them at an unsuspected rendezvous in the woods. Mary was talking earnestly and Boardman was listening with the greatest attention, watching the girl all the time with that strange new look in his eyes.

Ruth stole away so quietly that neither one of them knew they had been observed. Safely out of earshot, she chuckled softly.

"I knew it," she said to the empty woods. "It

looks as if Layton Boardman were beginning to wake up at last!"

When Ruth was faced with the problem of where to make her interior cabin scene her mind went naturally to the Chase cabin.

When she suggested this to the girls they were happy to find that anything they owned could be of use to Ruth. The cabin was hers, they told her, for as long as she desired it.

So for the greater part of a day Ruth, Tom, and their electricians spent their time at the cabin, arranging the proper lighting for the important interior scene.

When the work was finished and they were on their way home, Ruth decided that she wanted to look over the lighting arrangements once more.

Tom proposed that he return with her, but Ruth begged him to go on to the settlement. She might want to roam about the cabin and its environs for some time and she knew that Tom was very tired that day, having worked over his books the night before until dawn.

Ruth became so absorbed in the work that the lateness of the hour escaped her attention. Now, as she once more came in sight of the Chase house, she saw to her surprise that twilight was stealing over the woods.

Was it this fact, she wondered, that made her feel suddenly nervous and apprehensive? Cer-

tainly she had been out on the edge of evening many times before and had never experienced this sensation.

She glanced about her uneasily, and as she did so thought she saw a shadowy figure slip about the corner of the cabin. Her breath coming quickly, she hastened her steps and passed softly around to the rear of the house, and crept to the window.

What she saw there was enough to bring her heart into her throat. There was a moment of hesitation; then, swift as light, Ruth darted to the kitchen door.

At the slight sound she made the stooped figure of the man at the hearth straightened quickly. With a venomous look at Ruth and a muttered word he darted straight for her as she still stood in the doorway.

Hardly knowing what she did, conscious only of her necessity of stopping the rascal, Ruth stepped back, and as he passed her with a snarl of rage, put out her foot to trip him.

He came down heavily, for he was a large man, and lay inert, stretched out on his face.

CHAPTER XXI

DRAMA

ALARMED by the commotion, Mary and Ellen Chase came running from the inner room.

Ellen was trembling violently, the picture of terror. But Mary's chin was up and in her hand she carried her father's old shotgun!

"What is it, Miss Fielding? Oh, what has happened? What have you done?"

"I don't know," said Ruth, trembling herself now with the reaction and the fear that she had injured the intruder more severely than she had intended. "This man was trying to pry up a stone of your hearth, Mary, and when he attempted to escape I tripped him up. Come and help me turn him over and see how badly he's hurt."

"Is—do you suppose—he's dead?" asked Mary hesitantly, as she started to obey.

Before either of the girls could touch him the man answered Mary's question by turning over of his own accord and trying rather waveringly

to sit up, showing a large and swollen bump on his head.

The girls stepped back, staring at him as though he were some reptile.

"Lieberstein!" cried Mary, with all the contempt and loathing she felt for this man in her voice. "So it was you, was it? Again! Prying and sneaking around like any common thief. You're lucky that you only got tripped up and hit on the head. If I'd seen you first—" she did not finish the sentence, but made a significant gesture with her father's old shotgun. "I'm not sure," she added with a grim expression on her girlish face, "that I oughtn't to use it yet!"

The man got unsteadily to his feet, holding to the edge of the door casing for support.

"So you're the one who tripped me up," he snarled to Ruth, ignoring Mary and her threatening gun. "Well, young lady, the next time you try it, you'll wish you hadn't."

Ruth stepped close to him and in her eyes was a glitter before which his own gaze fell sullenly to the ground.

"And you might as well understand one thing," she said in an even tone. "These girls are not as friendless and defenseless as you seem to think! You and the man, or men, back of you stop annoying them or you will be extremely sorry."

Her scorn seemed to infuriate the man. He

lost all caution and for a moment the mean and sinister soul of him peered forth for all to see.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" he snarled. "Well, I'll tell you something. If you don't watch out, Sol Bloomberg will get your goat, and get it good, you—you——"

"Don't dare call her names!" cried a valiant voice, and Lieberstein whirled about to see himself looking into the barrel of Mary's weapon.

At that he lost what little self-control he had left. He lunged at the girl and knocked up the barrel of the gun just as Mary's nerveless finger pulled the trigger.

The shot went wild. At the same moment the man was seized by the shoulder from behind and sent whirling into the bushes.

"You swine!" cried the raging voice of Layton Boardman. "Clear out of here before I use this gun on you in earnest!"

He caught the gun from Mary, but before he could raise it to his shoulder Lieberstein scuttled off into the shrubbery with all the fleetness of a frightened rabbit.

Boardman was laughing softly, but there was no merriment in his mirth.

"The scoundrel!" he gritted. "Wish I'd used the gun on him. Good mind to do it after all!"

He started forward toward the spot where

Lieberstein disappeared. But Mary caught at his arm.

"Oh, let him go! Let him go!" she cried. "He won't be back soon again. I—I think you taught him a lesson, Mr. Boardman!"

Ruth went over to Ellen, who was sobbing against the door frame and put an arm about her. Then she turned to the actor.

"It was lucky for us that you came just then, Mr. Boardman," she said gravely. "Something pretty dreadful might have happened if you hadn't."

"I left my cap here the other day," Boardman explained, with his eyes still on Mary. "I was coming back to get it."

"Something must have sent you just at the right time," said Mary softly. "I shall always be thankful for that."

Ruth wanted the girls to come back with her to Knockout Point, for that night at least. But Mary refused, saying that they did not dare go so far from the cabin.

"I'm all right," she assured them, one arm thrown about the trembling shoulders of her sister. "You're not to worry, really. We're all right! We are not 'girl miners,' as Eddie calls us, for nothing. We know how to face things and to fight."

So Ruth and Boardman left them at last,

though reluctantly, when they saw that Mary could not be moved from her decision, and took the long trail homeward almost in silence.

Once when they were nearing the settlement, the actor clenched his hands and muttered as though he were thinking aloud:

"I should have been quicker on the trigger! I should have used that gun while it was in my hands!"

It was then that Ruth told him how she had happened to go back to the cottage and, seeing Lieberstein busily engaged in examining the fireplace, how she had interrupted him and then thwarted his attempt at escape. Then she related the subsequent hectic events up to the arrival on the scene of Boardman himself.

By the look in his eyes, Ruth saw that she had made one active ally for herself against the plottings of Lieberstein and the man behind him, if only for the sake of Mary Chase.

Nor were the days to follow free from annoying, mysterious incidents.

At one time it was Boardman's revolver that was missing, and one had to be borrowed from an extra who could manage to do without it.

At another time it was Alice Lytelly's special costume which it was necessary for her to wear in certain scenes of the picture. This entailed a hurried trip to the general store and a new dress

made as near in the style of the original as possible.

As a result of these delays and hindrances not only Ruth but the actors as well became nervous and irritable.

"Lucky," thought Ruth, grasping at what straws of comfort she could find, "that most of the biggest and most important scenes have already been filmed. Sol Bloomberg at least cannot spoil those!"

Which only goes to show that, even yet, Ruth had no adequate idea of the lengths to which a vindictive nature like Bloomberg's would be willing to go in order to cripple or disable an enemy.

One day Ruth and Helen took the long-contemplated trip to the Chase mine. They had arranged with Ellen to meet the latter at an early hour and go with her to the mine, since Mary would already be at work there.

They went on horseback to the little path leading into the woods where Tom and Chess and Layton Boardman had come upon Ruth and the Chase girls on the occasion of Ruth's first meeting with them.

There Ellen met them and said that they had better tether the horses in the woods since the trail from there on was so rocky and steep that it could only be ascended on foot.

They led the horses some little distance from the road and tethered them securely.

Both girls were in tune with the glorious day and the beauty of the northern scenery. The climb up the little path that wound about Snow Mountain was a delight to them. New and beautiful vistas opened up to them at every turn of the trail.

Now they skirted sheer, precipitous descents, where one misstep would mean almost certain death. Again they plunged into heavy woodland where wild flowers grew in a riot of color, showing vivid faces even in the crevices of the rocks.

"What I like about this country," said Helen, delighted, "is that you can have both summer and winter at once. Here the air is as mild and balmy as a southern spring, while up there—" She did not finish the sentence, but instead, waved her hand toward the shining crest of Snow Mountain, dazzling in the light of the brilliant northern sun.

"It is a beautiful country," agreed Ellen. "We love it, Mary and I, even though it has not been very kind to us."

It was quite a long climb, and both Helen and Ruth were considerably winded by the time they reached the little shack far up on the side of

the mountain which marked the location of the Chase mine.

They found Mary and the old miners hard at work near the choked-up mouth of the mine. They were busy digging out débris with pickax and shovel.

They had made good progress, but it seemed to both Ruth and Helen that there was still a discouragingly long way to go before the mouth of the mine could be opened and the actual work of gold-digging continued.

Mary's eyes brightened when she saw them and she came toward her new friends with hands outstretched.

"You look tired," she said. "It was a long climb, wasn't it?"

They answered that it was, and then Mary introduced the three old miners. They came forward in a rather embarrassed group, a trio of gnarled and weatherbeaten old fellows who had spent a lifetime looking for a fortune that never materialized.

They were self-conscious and shy in conversation with Helen and Ruth and seemed glad when they were able to return to their tedious and discouraging labor.

"They will scarcely take any pay from us," said Mary in a low voice, tears in her eyes as she looked at these loyal old friends. "They loved

Dad and they feel sure if we can once get the stones and débris cleared away we will find real pay dirt."

"Old Uncle Eddie has rheumatism," said Ellen, indicating one of the old men who limped painfully when he walked. "He should have a doctor."

"And we haven't the money to pay one," said Mary sadly.

Later the girls took them to the little shack and showed them a hidden jar half-filled with gold dust that had been sifted from the sand.

"Dad found this before he died," Mary told her new friends, adding simply: "That is why he was so sure the mine was good."

But though Ruth and Helen stayed for some time longer and tried to appear as encouraging and cheerful as they could, they were in a saddened and thoughtful mood as they took the long trail homeward.

Ellen accompanied them again, in her capacity of guide to the spot where they had left their horses tethered; then said good-bye to them swiftly and hurried back toward the cabin. She had left some one in charge there, but was afraid the guardian might be gone if she remained too long away.

"They never will be able to do anything up at the mine with the equipment they have," said

Helen, as she and Ruth cantered slowly on toward Knockout Point. "It is like trying to catch a whale with a bent pin on the end of a string."

Ruth nodded.

"It is the most pathetic sight I ever saw," she said. "Those three old men working like slaves for the girls just because they liked their father——"

"And no money to pay a doctor for that poor old fellow's rheumatism," Helen added. "I declare, Ruth, if I thought the old man would take it, I'd pay for the doctor myself!"

But though Ruth and Helen were both depressed by their visit to the Chase mine, they were glad that they had made it. It gave them a better idea of the stupendous task before Mary and Ellen Chase and increased their admiration and respect for these plucky girls and the manner in which they set about to overcome the obstacles in their path.

That they were not the only ones to admire the Chase girls Ruth was informed by Tom in a laughing conversation they had a few days after her trip to the Chase mine.

"Layton Boardman is in a bad way, poor chap," laughed Tom. He and Ruth were taking a quiet stroll along the one main street of Knockout Point after a busy day. "He confided to me to-day that for a long time he was feeling queer

and thought he was coming down with some sickness or other. What was his surprise then, to find it was only love!"

Ruth looked up at him, eyes suddenly eager, in spite of her amusement.

"Tom! Then he is in love with Mary!"

Tom nodded.

"It affects 'em that way sometimes," he said, with a whimsical laugh.

"Well, I am glad," said Ruth and added with a fine enthusiasm: "She deserves all the good luck that comes her way. She is the pluckiest girl I know!"

"Except one!" said Tom, and looked at Ruth.

Meanwhile Ruth was working steadily on her picture.

Despite the set-backs and nerve-racking delays, several of the finishing outdoor scenes of minor importance were filmed about the cabin and on Snow Mountain. Ruth was beginning to hope that all might yet be well.

Then, one day when she was out alone searching for a new location on Snow Mountain, Ruth stepped on something hard and the next moment two sets of sharp, inexorable steel teeth clamped upon her walking boot.

Feeling sick with shock and apprehension Ruth looked down and found that her foot was tightly caught in the jaws of a trap.

Lucky for her that her boots were made of heavy, tough leather, or those cruel steel teeth would have cut through to the bone.

As it was, the pressure was sickeningly painful.

With a little moan Ruth sank to the ground, wrenching the trapped foot as she did so.

"This is too much," she said aloud in her anxiety. Looking up at the snow-crested top of Snow Mountain she smiled a crooked twisted little smile. "Snow Mountain! They say you bring good luck. And I have had nothing but the worst of luck ever since I saw you! I wish," she cried, with a sudden burst of helpless fury, "I had never seen you!"

As the seconds raced into minutes and the minutes dragged into hours and still no help came to her, Ruth began to feel as though release would never come.

She worked at the steel jaws of the trap, calmly at first, then feverishly, until her fingers were bruised and bleeding with the effort to free the imprisoned foot.

It was of no use. She had known from the first that she might as well try to push Snow Mountain from its resting place as to attempt to open the cruel trap with her bare fingers.

She was hungry and thirsty and utterly exhausted. Would she have to spend the night there? she wondered, dully.

Meanwhile, back at headquarters, Tom had heard news of vital importance to Ruth, news that had sent him rushing grimly after her.

Luckily she had told him the general direction of her wanderings, so that, once on his way, it took him only a short time to find her.

His cries of "Ruth! Ruth! Where are you?" brought an answering, sobbing cry from the girl.

His heart full of apprehension, Tom plunged through the bushes in the direction of that pitiful cry.

He found the girl huddled on the ground, her face white and drawn with pain, a gallant smile of welcome touching her pale lips.

He saw at once what the matter was and set to work without waste of words to liberate the imprisoned foot. He searched about until he found two flat slabs of stone, then wedged these in between the steel jaws of the cruel trap. He managed at last, by exerting his utmost strength, to loosen them just enough to permit Ruth to drag her foot and ankle through.

"Lucky for me, Tom, that you happened along just then," she said unsteadily, as Tom stooped gently to unlace the boot.

Something in his face as he glanced pityingly at her warned the girl that all was not well.

"Tom!" she cried, clutching at his arm, a sudden cold terror at her heart. "Something has

happened! You can't keep anything from me! I know too well. Tom, please tell me!"

"Let's wait till we see how the poor foot is," Tom muttered. He went on unlacing the boot and kept his eyes resolutely averted from hers.

"Tom!" Her clutch on his arm was imperative, frantic. "Whatever has happened that you are afraid to tell me, don't torture me by putting it off this way. Can't you see I must know at once?"

Tom took her cold hand in both his own and from that moment all pretense was gone. The depth of his apprehension showed plainly in his troubled face.

"You're a brick, Ruth," he said. "I know you will take this standing as you have taken everything else. But it's a pretty tough one. Two magazines of films have disappeared!"

CHAPTER XXII

BLOOMBERG STRIKES

RUTH looked at Tom for a moment, completely stunned by the force of this revelation.

"Gone!" she exclaimed. "Tell me! Who found out about the missing magazines and when?"

"Bert Traymore—just a short time ago," Tom answered jerkily. He drew off the boot and saw with a pang of pity that Ruth's ankle was swollen and puffy. "As soon as he told me I came to find you."

"Have you done anything—sent any one to track down the thief?" Ruth's voice was quiet as she put the questions. No time now for hysteria, she told herself sternly. This occasion called for all the grit and stamina she possessed. No need to ask who was at the bottom of the theft. This was Bloomberg's revenge—the blow she had been waiting for and dreading ever since she had heard that her enemy was at Knockout Point. To outwit such a man as Bloomberg

called for calm nerve and a cool mind. To give way now would be merely to play into Sol Bloomberg's hands.

Tom nodded in reply to her question.

"I've already sent several of the boys to scout about. And I've detailed a couple of them to shadow Bloomberg and watch his slightest move. By the way," he looked up with the faintest grim lifting of the corners of his mouth, "we have one bit of startling information from the most promising young detective in our midst."

"Eben!" cried Ruth. "What is it, Tom? Oh, hurry!"

"He says he saw Charlie Reid coming out of The Big Chance the other evening. It was just on the edge of dusk, and he says he can't swear to the man's identity, but he's just about certain it was Reid. He lived in the same apartment house with Reid a winter or so ago, and knows the fellow. Of course," Tom added, with a deprecating shrug of his shoulders, "the kid's mistaken. Charlie Reid is safe in New York right now."

"No!" said Ruth quickly, "I believe Eben is right, Tom; and I'll tell you why."

In short, jerky, breathless sentences she told him then of the impression both she and Helen had had that they were being followed and of the two occasions when they had caught sight of

some one who looked strikingly like Charlie Reid.

"So!" said Tom, his eyes narrowed to a steely glitter. "We have *that* rascal to deal with, too, have we? Well, the more the merrier!"

"You—you don't think the ankle is broken, do you, Tom?" she asked, regarding the injured member anxiously. "It—it wiggles!"

"Then it isn't broken," said Tom, admiring her pluck and the unquenchable humor that never failed her even in the most desperate predicament. "I think it's only bruised by the pressure, and perhaps a strained tendon or two. Luckily I came on horseback—and the mare's husky enough to carry us both."

Before Ruth could protest he lifted her in his arms and carried her over to the spot where he had left his horse grazing on the stubby grass.

They rode back to Knockout Point to find the entire company in a state of excitement and alarm.

Carried to her room by Tom, who still would not let her put her foot to the ground, Ruth sent at once for her assistant directors and the cameramen.

"What you need is to rest for a little, Ruthie," protested Helen. To the latter and Chess, Tom had explained briefly how he had found Ruth and released her from the steel jaws of the trap. "Your poor foot must pain you terribly."

"It's nothing!" cried Ruth, impatient of anything that might delay her search for the missing films. "By to-morrow the ankle will be well again. But the magazines! Tom, why don't those people hurry?"

They came before she had finished speaking the words—a solemn-visaged group of men, fully realizing the gravity of the situation.

"Sit down, please," she said curtly. "Now please tell me whose fault it is that this thing happened to-day. I suppose you know," she added, her steady gaze holding them, "just what it means!"

"We know only too well, Miss Fielding," said Bert Traymore, with a worried frown. "We had the take-up boxes locked in the big chest. There was a padlock besides——"

"And that was forced as well as the lock," said Schultz.

"What was taken?" Ruth's anxiety made the words sting like the lash of a whip.

"Magazines seven and ten," said Atwater, and added in a gloomy voice, as though he thought the worst might as well be told at once: "Miss Lang's big scene was in number ten."

Ruth sprang to her feet; then knitted her brows in an effort to keep back an exclamation of pain and impatience. That ankle again!

"I must go at once and see—" she began, but

Tom interrupted her with more than his usual firmness.

"You can't go anywhere just now. See, you can hardly walk!"

"Was there no clew to the thief?" asked Ruth, after a moment.

"Nothing but a few greasy fingermarks, Miss Fielding," replied Schultz.

"But we've got to get back those films!" cried Ruth, her eyes suddenly blazing in her white face as she turned fiercely upon the three cameramen. "You are responsible for the magazines. You allowed two of them to be stolen. Now you've got to get them back for me! Do you hear? Get them back for me!"

When Schultz and Traymore and Atwater left the conference some time later they were three very much subdued and anxious men. No one wanted more than they to recover the missing magazines and no one knew better than they how difficult, perhaps impossible, a task this would be.

For a long time after they had left her Ruth sat silent in the big chair, chin on palm, eyes brooding.

"It's hard, hard luck, Helen," she said, when the latter would have comforted her. "Or rather, I might say, it's Bloomberg! He seems to have been a little too clever for me, after all. My, how tired I am!"

This mood of desolation lasted through a phantom-filled, restless night, but was partially dissolved by the sun of a brilliant northern day. When the first rays of the sun streamed across her face Ruth threw back the covers and anxiously regarded her injured ankle.

"You aren't nearly so swollen as you were yesterday," she said presumably addressing the ankle. "And I don't believe you will be nearly so painful!"

Very gingerly and carefully she tested the truth of this bold assertion, resting the foot lightly on the floor, then adding more pressure when the expected pain failed to register.

To her delight she found that she could walk. The ankle was naturally still sore and painful, but by hobbling and by taking the burden of her weight mostly on the well foot she could manage to get about without too much discomfort.

Pausing in the midst of these experiments to find Helen's eyes fixed sleepily upon her, Ruth smiled.

"I'm only a make-believe cripple," she cried, with an attempt at gayety. "Who knows? Ruth Fielding may defeat Sol Bloomberg yet!"

But though the injury to Ruth's ankle was far less serious than she had dared to hope, still the young director found herself greatly handicapped in the serious work of the day. It was plain to

her that she must favor the ankle and go lightly on it for that day at least. To use it too much while it was still so tender meant that she might be laid up for days to come.

"You and Chess will have to follow the thief," she told Tom after breakfast that morning. "If Eben was right about seeing Charlie Reid at The Big Chance, then I believe he is certainly the fellow Bloomberg would employ and the man you have to find. His trail ought still to be fresh and comparatively easy to follow if you start at once. Perhaps you may find the films and bring them back to me by night. Oh, boys, please try! You know what it means to me—to us, Tom!"

"We'll get those films if it takes a leg!" promised Tom.

"If it takes both of 'em!" Chess added vehemently.

The girls watched the two boys ride off in a cloud of dust, waving to them until they could no longer be seen.

In spite of Helen's earnest efforts to keep her chum quiet and save the ankle from further injury, Ruth could not sit still. She was the victim of an intolerable restlessness; inertia was positive agony to her.

She had another conference with her cameramen. They took her to the chest in which they had locked up the precious, daylight loaded films.

With lugubrious countenance Schultz, Traymore and Atwater showed her the padlock that had been forced in their absence, the place where the stolen magazines had rested.

The films necessary for the day's work of the cameramen are contained in daylight loading boxes, or magazines. These magazines are carefully loaded in a dark room and so become daylight loading in the camera. Ruth knew that in the motion picture camera, these magazines are interchangeable, the film passing out of the top magazine through the mechanism of the camera and into the lower magazine. Here it is wound up and carefully protected against light, to be developed later in the laboratory. The lower box is called the "take-up magazine," and when this is removed the top magazine is put in its place and a freshly loaded box takes the place of the empty one.

It was two of these precious take-up magazines, neatly labeled as to the exact nature of their contents, that had been filched from the chest.

"I wonder," said Ruth moodily, "why the thief did not take them all?"

"If there were only one or two men operating they could not get away with any more," said Traymore, haggard lines of worry on his usually merry countenance. "I can't tell you how sorry I

am that this has happened, Miss Fielding. I could hardly sleep last night——"

"I guess none of us could!" Again Ruth's worry made her words more brusque than she intended. "We must have the locks replaced at once, and please see that some one guards this chest night and day from now on. Although," she added unhappily, speaking more to herself than to Traymore, "it is very much like locking the stable after the favorite colt is gone!"

After this conference it was impossible for Ruth to remain quiet.

"Let's get a couple of mounts somewhere and ride up in the woods a way," she suggested to Helen. "Certainly that can't hurt my miserable old ankle."

"We might ride as far as the Chase cabin," said Helen, a bit doubtfully. "They would be glad to see you."

"The very thing! I want to learn how they are making out in protecting their claim."

"Oh, I guess they are all right."

"Let us hope so," and Ruth sighed. "Oh, my, what a lot of trouble all of us are having!" she added.

CHAPTER XXIII

RUTH GOES TO THE RESCUE

In one or two of the minor scenes, Ruth had been able to use Sandy Banks and Slick Jones as extras. The two added a great deal to the local color of the scenes in which they were used and Ruth only regretted that she had not been able to use them more frequently.

As it was, the money the young director had given them in return for "enjoyin' themselves," as they put it, had made them Ruth's great friends. As for Slick Jones, the best he had was none too good for this favorite of his. The result was that the girls now found themselves mounted on a pair of gentle though high-spirited colts that seemed aware of the distinguished company they were in and carried themselves accordingly.

It was a relief to Ruth to be doing something again. As the two girls cantered along through the woods in the general direction of the Chase cabin Ruth listened absently to Helen's chatter. Her actual thoughts were with the Chase girls.

They soon entered the tiny path that led to the Chase cabin. Here the branches of the trees swept so low that the girls were forced to dismount and tie their horses and proceed the rest of the distance on foot.

Ruth's ankle was unexpectedly painful, and she leaned rather heavily on Helen's supporting arm as they approached the cabin.

"Foolish child!" Helen was scolding. "You have no business to be getting around at all today. Serve you right if you were laid up for a week after this escapade——"

"Sh-h!" warned Ruth, her fingers tightening nervously on Helen's arm. "There are voices inside the cabin. Listen—a man's voice!"

They stood still and listened, holding their breath so as not to lose the slightest sound from the cabin.

They were close now. There was the low, heartbroken sound of a girl sobbing—Ellen probably—another passionately raised woman's voice and the threatening growl of a man.

"A little closer!" urged Ruth, pulling Helen toward the window where they might gain a glimpse of the room.

Cautiously they approached the house, avoiding the door so that no sudden rush from within might take them by surprise. Stealing to one of

the windows they peered in and saw a tableau that might have chilled the stoutest heart.

Ellen was crouched in the far corner of the cabin, on her drawn young face an expression of terror. Characteristically, Mary bravely held the old shotgun, but her hands shook so—with excitement as much as, or more than, with fear, Ruth decided—that they could scarcely bear the weight of it.

The third figure was that of a man. The girls outside could not see his face, but even with his back to them he suggested sickeningly the beast of prey, stalking his victim relentlessly and about to spring.

"Lieberstein!" whispered Ruth.

She shrank back from the window and faced Helen, a fierce light in her eyes.

"Ride back to town, quick!" she cried. "Get some of the boys and bring them here. I'll try to hold Lieberstein if I can!"

"But your ankle——"

"Never mind me!" cried Ruth. "Helen, please don't stop to argue! Those two girls need help!"

"All right. I'll be back with some one in a jiffy!"

In a flash she was off, running swiftly and noiselessly toward the spot where they had left the horses.

Ruth approached the window again and looked

in. She knew what Lieberstein had come after. Mary had whispered to her only a short time before—having come to know Ruth and to trust her—that her father's precious papers had been hidden by Ellen and herself in an old cow horn back of a loose stone in the hearth. But when Ruth came upon Lieberstein prowling close to the hiding place, Mary had become alarmed and hidden the papers in a new spot. Where they were now she had never revealed even to Ruth, for Mary Chase had learned caution in a hard school!

Mary had been holding the shotgun, but as Ruth looked, the bully wrenched it from her hands and kicked it contemptuously into one corner of the cabin.

He sneered at Mary and advanced toward her, hands upraised threateningly.

"You'll threaten me, will you, you little rat!" Ruth heard him say. "Well, I told you, didn't I, that you'd get fresh with Max Lieberstein once too often? I'm not goin' to be put off any longer. Now! will you tell me where you hid those papers your Dad set such store by or won't you?"

"I won't!" cried Mary, undaunted, and reached behind her for the cane her father had sometimes used.

"Drop that!" ordered Lieberstein, and sprang forward.

Ruth waited for no more.

She hobbled as swiftly as she could on her painful ankle to the door and cautiously opened it. The two in the far corner of the room were too engrossed to notice her. And Ellen, reaching with trembling hands for a chair, seemed not to see her either.

The shotgun lay before Ruth. In a flash inspiration came to her. She stooped and picked up the weapon, then retreated quickly toward the door again.

"Hands up!" she cried in a clear, sharp voice. "We've got you!"

The ruse worked. Taken completely by surprise and thinking probably that the girl was followed by a score of others, the cowardly rascal whirled about, at the same time lifting his hands above his head.

"Now," cried Ruth, eyes blazing. "You utter one more threat to that girl if you dare!"

By this time Lieberstein began to realize that he had been the victim of a clever ruse. He had been tricked, fooled, by a mere girl.

The fury of such a nature as Lieberstein's beneath such provocation can only be imagined. He was white with rage, and advanced upon Ruth with both fists upraised.

"You—you—" he sputtered. "I'll show you——"

But there was something about Ruth and her

attitude as she stood facing him that made him pause despite himself. For in that moment the anger of the young director quite matched Lieberstein's. And she possessed one great advantage over him in that her mind became more clear and calm the greater rage she felt and functioned with an almost uncanny swiftness and accuracy.

"Don't come another step!" she commanded in a voice that was as clear and cold as the dropping of icicles. "Under the circumstances I wouldn't mind much if this gun did go off. And if you come much closer, maybe it will. Keep that hand up, please!"

The command was so sharp and was accompanied by such a suggestive motion of the shotgun that Lieberstein obeyed almost automatically. His right hand that had been wandering toward his belt joined the left above his head.

Ruth was excited and strangely exhilarated. She was holding the scoundrel! If she could only keep this up for a short time longer Helen would be back with some one from Knockout Point. Her ears strained for the sound of approaching aid.

"You've got the drop on me this time," snarled Lieberstein, his face purple with rage. "Ruth Fielding, the great director, on the job again! You'd better keep out of this, you——"

"Stop!"

It was Mary's voice. She and Ellen had crept close to Ruth. Mary grasped the heavy cane. Ellen had raised the chair above her head, ready for action.

"You stop!" cried Mary again, her eyes steely as she looked at Lieberstein. "Ruth Fielding is my friend. She has been kind to Ellen and me. You are a fiend. Don't you dare call her names."

This new attack seemed to drive Lieberstein beyond himself with fury. He ignored Ruth and the shotgun and charged down upon Mary, face livid.

"Hands up—you!"

Lieberstein whirled about.

In the doorway stood Layton Boardman!

CHAPTER XXIV

BOARDMAN WAKES UP

MARY and Ellen Chase were as startled and surprised to see Layton Boardman as Lieberstein himself, though his interference meant something quite different to them.

For a moment the eyes of Boardman and Mary met, and that one look told more than a great many words could have done. He moved a little closer to the girl and then turned his attention again to the cowering Lieberstein.

It was characteristic of Ruth that, even in that moment of strain and tense expectancy, the uppermost thought in her mind was professional.

"Our leading man was never in better form in his life," was her unspoken comment upon the scene. "What a picture this would make! Almost," with a whimsical smile, "true to life!"

As Boardman advanced into the cabin, driving Lieberstein before him, they saw that he was not alone. Helen followed him, breathless and dishevelled, but triumphant. After her came several

young miners whom Ruth recognized as having been much in Boardman's company recently.

These gathered about the now cringing Lieberstein, muttering threats and scowling at him. One, more eager than the rest, reached out a hand as though to seize the fellow by his collar, but Boardman pushed him aside.

"Not yet, Nick!" he said. "We'll give the cur just one more chance. Now listen, you!" He placed himself directly before Lieberstein and forced the cowering, sullen fellow to meet his eyes. "We're telling you something to-day, and a lapse of memory on the subject will cost you your dog's life. That's as sure as that the sun will come up to-morrow. Am I right, boys?"

There was an eager, growling assent from the miners as they pressed a little closer.

"We're givin' you just one more chance to beat it! You savvy?" As he often did when excited or greatly moved, Boardman dropped back into the cowboy dialect—a hangover from those wild days on the ranch when his name was still unknown to picturedom. "We've got a lot o' patience, but where you're concerned, it's wearin' thin, brother. We don't like you and we don't like your way of doin' things. If we find you've cleared out for good before sundown to-morrow, you'll have saved your yellow skin. But if you

don't take our advice, why— You tell him, fellows!" turning to his companions.

"The nearest tree!" said one.

"And a good stout rope!" added another.

Still a third made a significant gesture with both hands, a gesture strongly reminiscent of the twisted neck of a barnyard fowl.

While Ruth felt sure that these threats were made simply for the purpose of frightening the cowardly Lieberstein from the neighborhood of Knockout Point, the gestures of the young miners were vivid enough to make her feel uncomfortable. And she was conscious all of a sudden that she was very tired and that her ankle was paining her.

Lieberstein's face was a study of conflicting emotions.

"I'll get out!" he muttered, with an ugly look. "You bunch of——"

Boardman took a menacing step forward and there was a deep grumble from the others.

"You might," suggested the actor gently, his eyes again narrowed to a steely glitter, "try beatin' it now. Brother, I'm goin' to start countin' five——"

He started counting, still in that gentle drawl, marking off the counts on his fingers.

Lieberstein, crouching now like a cornered animal, seemed about to spring upon his tor-

mentor. But the odds were too heavy against him. As Boardman's soft voice drawled out the number "four," he turned and bolted from the place.

The others followed him to the door of the cabin, Mary still clinging to Boardman, and heard him crash off through the bushes. Like hunting dogs balked of their quarry, the miners started after him.

"No funny business, boys!" Boardman warned them. "Just see where he goes and *that* he goes. If he is still in the settlement to-morrow, bring him to me!"

Then Layton Boardman turned to Mary Chase and drew her to him.

"Your worries are all over, girl," Ruth and Helen heard him murmur softly. "You can put away your dad's old shotgun in the darkest corner you've got. For you're never going to need it any more!"

"The close-up," murmured Ruth to Helen, as they turned away.

"And for us," Helen finished whimsically, "the fade-out!"

So it was that the problem of Mary Chase and her sister Ellen was a problem no longer, even though the affairs of "the girl miners of Snow Mountain," as Eddie Jones called them, still needed adjusting.

Max Lieberstein left Knockout Point on the very night of the trouble at the cabin. Evidently he realized that Boardman and his friends meant very serious business.

In a day or so Boardman met Mr. Knowles again. The old gentleman had accomplished something for his young friends—and a very important something it turned out to be.

He had brought a man from Dawson City to look over the Chase mine and ascertain whether it was as valuable as its owner had thought it to be before his death.

The report of this man was such as to raise the girls to the seventh heaven of delight. According to this expert the Chase mine was a rich one.

"It's all your doing, Ruth Fielding!" said Mary, on one occasion when Ruth again visited the cabin and heard the great news. "Our dear old friends up at the mine are crazy with delight over our good fortune."

"It's theirs, too, now," said Ellen. "Or part of it." And she went on to tell that she and Mary had decided to turn over a part interest in the mine to the three old men who had been so loyal to them in the time of their trouble.

"Uncle Eddie can have that famous doctor up from Seattle to see him now," she finished. "When we told him, he—he cried!"

"We all did," confessed Mary, with a smile. "I guess you would have thought we were all crazy if you could have seen us when we got the good news."

"We all joined hands and danced around like mad, even Uncle Eddie," said Ellen, adding with a chuckle: "Then we all sat down and cried."

"I'm not so sure but what I'm going to weep, too," cried Ruth, with eyes suspiciously bright. "Just to be in the swim, you know."

But in her solitary moments Ruth was not at all gay. The problem of the Chase girls was definitely removed from her mind, but she was still living through one of the most trying times of her life.

Although Chess and Tom had thoroughly searched the settlement and its vicinity, had faithfully followed up the slightest clew, there was still no trace of the missing film magazines.

Without them the picture as a whole was ruined. They contained the best, the most powerful scenes of the play. Edith Lang's big scene, reënacted after the first failure, was one of them. Several scenes with Carlton Brewer, the man who had taken the place of the dwarf, Joe Rumph, were also among those missing.

Brewer had been fine in those scenes, too. Neither Ruth's confidence in the cleverness of her

make-up man, Abe Levy, nor in the ability of the actor had been misplaced.

Brewer had acted the part of the cripple powerfully and well. Where Joe Rumph had over-emphasized the part, he emphasized it just enough. In fact, he fitted in so admirably with her conception of the part as it should be played that Ruth was delighted and more than ever confident of the wisdom of her choice.

Now these scenes were gone! The thief with wicked and unerring cunning had taken the very heart of the play. And the worst of it was that there was no time for a retake, even if it were possible to do the scene as well a second time.

The Yukon's open season was wearing on. Only in summer, when the ice in the river disappears for a few short weeks, is the river navigable. Winter comes suddenly and soon in Alaska, and those who linger too long are apt to wake up some morning to find the river blocked with ice and themselves marooned for no one knows how long.

None of the actors cared to remain in Alaska over the severe winter. And besides, Alice Lytelly was wanted in Hollywood.

No, there would be no time for the refilming of those important scenes. That, Ruth knew, was definitely out of the question. Her one chance lay in finding the lost films—and that

chance, even Tom and the optimistic Chess, began to think was exceedingly slim.

And to fail here meant only one thing, that for the first time in her film career Ruth must face defeat!

Knowing this, Ruth wondered how she found the courage to go on at all. But on she did go, just the same, automatically directing the last few scenes on Snow Mountain until all were at last complete.

The picture was finished and, more than that, in every way it lived up to Ruth's own high standards. And—the heart of it was gone!

Tom felt that Bloomberg might have another reason for the theft of Ruth's films, besides the obvious one of attempting to ruin her picture.

"He may think it's a good chance to make some easy money," he said. "Bloomberg may simply have hidden the films and then, when he gets ready, will demand money for the return of them."

One day when Tom and Chess were off on their indefatigable search and Ruth had started off alone to walk and indulge her gloomy thoughts, she saw a rider dashing toward her through a cloud of dust.

The man drew rein close to her and held out a torn and dirty scrap of paper.

"I found this wrapped around a stone and

thrown into the middle of the road," he told her, panting. "I guess, ma'am, it's meant for you."

Ruth opened the crumpled scrap of paper addressed to her with trembling fingers.

On it were scrawled a few words in writing she recognized as Tom's.

"Prisoners in a cabin at lower end of Bear Creek. Help us!"

The signature, scarcely legible, was, "Tom."

CHAPTER XXV

THE RECKONING

RUTH stared at the crumpled bit of paper for a moment of quick thought.

It was evident that Tom and Chess had stumbled into a trap of some sort. It might be a trap deliberately set by Bloomberg and his tools. Or it might have been—and here Ruth's breath caught in a gasp of hope—that the boys had struck a real trail at last and stumbled upon the hiding place of the films.

At any rate, there was no time to be lost. Tom and Chess were probably both in deadly peril. She must get help to them at once!

She turned swiftly to the man who had brought the message.

He was one of Boardman's friends and admirers—a miner who had been a cowboy in the same territory in the actor's ranching days. Now he had quieted his horse and stood at a little distance from Ruth, eager to serve, but respectful.

"Can you get together a few men," she asked

him breathlessly. "Perhaps the same that ran Max Lieberstein out of town? It seemed to me," she added, by way of hurried explanation, "that they were brave resolute men, and that's the kind we'll need just now."

"Reckon I can get all you want, ma'am," the lad replied eagerly. Then, hesitating: "It's about Mr. Cameron, ain't it, ma'am?"

"He and his friend are prisoners," answered Ruth. "Here!" and she thrust the crumpled paper into his hands. "Read this!"

The young fellow read the brief message, frowning. A grim smile touched the corners of his mouth as he handed the paper back to Ruth.

"Guess we know whose work this is, ma'am," he said, and added as he sprang to his horse and wheeled it about: "I'll fetch the boys."

"Meet me at Knockout Inn," gasped Ruth. "I want to get Mr. Boardman, too."

The miner nodded and was off in a cloud of dust.

Ruth hurried back to the inn, her mind awhirl with confused and torturing thoughts.

How had Tom and Chess stumbled into the lion's den? Had it been a trap set for them by Bloomberg? Or had they actually discovered the hiding place of the films and because of this been captured and held by the enemy?

Useless to ask herself these questions now.

The thing to do—the only thing to do—was to reach the boys at once, to rescue them before the vindictive Bloomberg and his confederates, thinking perhaps that Tom and Chess knew too much concerning the whereabouts of the films, might do their prisoners some serious injury.

The films! The films! Her precious films! Ruth clenched her hands against the hope that she might recover them after all. She must not torture herself with hopes for which there was, as yet, no real foundation.

Tom and Chess were in trouble, perhaps desperate trouble. She must think of them exclusively now.

Arrived at Knockout Inn she found that Kid Curry, the lad who had brought her the message from Tom, had already arrived with "the boys." Curry was explaining the situation to Layton Boardman in curt, gruff sentences when Ruth came up to them.

Helen flew down the steps of the inn and flung her arms about her chum.

"Ruth!" she cried, her pretty face drawn with anxiety, "what is this I hear about the boys?"

"Let's get started and I'll tell you," said Ruth. She scarcely knew her own voice, it sounded so strained and queer.

Boardman came up to her, chin thrust out, his determined eyes gleaming under heavy brows.

"We'll get them, Miss Fielding!" he promised grimly. "There is not a man here but what has some private and personal grudge against Bloomberg. May the Fates help him if we lay hands on him to-day!"

"Then let us hurry—hurry!" begged Ruth passionately. "We must not waste a moment! Are you all ready?"

"Ready!" cried Boardman, and there came eager assent from the men.

At Boardman's request, two horses had been made ready for the girls. They sprang to the saddle and intimated by slackened rein that the animals might set their own pace.

It was a good one, and as the posse dashed along the dusty road it presented a formidable appearance.

"Mean business, Slick, I reckon," said Sandy Banks, twirling the upturning ends of his magnificent mustache thoughtfully. "Wouldn't care to be in that Bloomberg's shoes, no way you might look at it."

"I'd like to be in Bloomberg's pocket though," said the mournful Slick Jones, feeling ruefully of his own flat wallet. "Might get back some of what's owing me from that there sneakin' crook. You can take it from me, my lad, that whatever Sol Bloomberg gets, it ain't one, two, three to what's owin' him!"

Meanwhile, Boardman and Kid Curry had taken the lead in the rescue party.

"You know Bear Creek better than I do," Ruth explained. Then, as she felt again the urge of haste: "Oh, we must hurry! Hurry!"

But when they had nearly reached their destination it was Ruth who again took the lead. She knew that the cabin must be approached with great caution. To warn Bloomberg of their approach would rob their attack of the great advantage it now possessed, the element of surprise.

The party proceeded cautiously on foot, Helen and Ruth close together, the men following one by one, as stealthy and grim as Indians. Not so much as a snapped twig betrayed their approach.

"There's the cabin," Helen whispered suddenly, as a tumble-down hut loomed through the thinning shrubbery. "Oh, Ruth," with a moment of sheer panic, "what is happening to Chess—to Tom—inside that place!"

"Sh-h!" whispered Ruth. "Helen, dear, we shall soon find out!"

Ruth Fielding was trembling with excitement. Her knees felt weak, unable to bear her weight. But she forced herself to go forward, praying a little wildly beneath her breath.

"Oh, Lord, keep them safe! Just a little longer—just a moment longer—" Her dry lips formed the words but no sound came.

They reached the cabin and managed, in accordance with a whispered command from Layton Boardman, to surround it without disturbing whoever might be within.

Her heart pounding in her throat, Ruth crept close to a window and looked within. Helen was close beside her. Her cold hand stole into Ruth's and held it tight.

The pane was so encrusted with dirt that for a moment it was impossible to see what was within the room. Then one by one objects began to stand out more clearly.

Tom and Chess were lying on the floor, hands bound behind them. Their clothing was dishevelled, their faces encrusted with dirt. Grouped about them in various attitudes were three men—Sol Bloomberg, chewing his inevitable unlighted cigar and evidently taking huge delight in the proceedings; Joe Rumph, scowling, grotesque, hideous in his deformity; and—Charlie Reid!

Then, Charlie Reid had followed them all the way from New York! It had been Charlie Reid, then, and no other, whom Eben Howe had seen furtively leaving the door of Knockout Inn! It was Charlie Reid, too, in all probability, who had stolen the films, acting, as always, as the tool of Sol Bloomberg!

"So!" the girls heard Bloomberg say, his oily voice thick and gloating with triumph, "you

thought you would be so smart, didn't you? What good has it done you to find the films? I ask you that?"

Ruth's heart leaped at the words and she gripped Helen's arm.

"By the time your friends find you," Bloomberg's mocking voice went on, "those films will be where you cannot touch them—and me also. Where will your great Ruth Fielding be then, I ask you——"

"Right here, Sol Bloomberg!" Ruth spoke from the open doorway, her head held high, eyes flashing. Behind her stood Layton Boardman and several of the miners. "And now," her voice rang through the place, "where are my films?"

Bloomberg stared as though he had seen a ghost. His cigar hung limp from flaccid lips. Then with a roar like a wounded bull, he sprang to his feet and dashed for the window.

The move was so sudden and catlike that the rascal was fairly through the window before any one could move to stop him.

The next moment there came a report, followed by a cry of rage and pain. Ruth and Helen rushed to the window. Bloomberg was prostrate on the ground, blood streaming from a wound in his leg. Above him stood Kid Curry, the smoking revolver still in his hand.

"You will tote two aces, you sneakin' crook!"

growled the lad, touching the wounded man contemptuously with his foot. "Next time maybe I won't shoot so low!"

Ruth turned back into the room. Her hands were clenched, her mouth felt dry.

It took only a glance to show her that both Rumph and Charlie Reid were in the hands of Boardman and his men.

She rushed over to Tom. He had struggled to a sitting position and was trying to spit out the filthy rag that gagged him.

With the aid of Boardman's knife, Ruth freed him.

"Tom, what have they done to you? Are you hurt? Oh, Tom!"

"I'm all right," said Tom thickly, his tongue swollen and cracked. "Get the—films——"

"The films!" gasped Ruth. "Where, Tom?"

Tom nodded toward the farther end of the room.

"Trapdoor," he muttered. "Uneven place—pry up—films there——"

Before he had finished Ruth and Boardman were down on their knees beside the place Tom indicated. It took them only a moment to find the uneven spot in the flooring—another to lift the loosened section and disclose the hole beneath!

Ruth gave a strangled laugh and plunged her hand into the aperture.

"The films!" she cried. "My precious films! Tom—Helen—I think I'll just die—of joy!"

" 'The Girl of Gold,' " said Layton Boardman, looking gravely down upon her, "is saved!"

Such rejoicing as there was at Knockout Point that night!

Tom and Chess appeared little the worse for the wear and tear of their harrowing experience. Stiff and sore they were, for a fact, but so elated over the success of their detective work that a few small bodily ills meant nothing to them.

They had, it appeared, chanced to see Charlie Reid emerge from the back door of The Big Chance. The fellow had glanced furtively along the street, but had not looked up to the second story window of a near-by building where Tom and Chess were, talking and joking with Sandy Banks. The two young men had hurried down the stairs and had followed Reid to the cabin and had crept upon him as he was in the act of looking into the hiding place of the films, apparently to see if they were still safe.

But suddenly, just when they had seemed in sight of victory, they had been set upon from behind by Bloomberg and the powerful Rumph. They had both been knocked out by a vicious blow

on the head and when they came back to consciousness found themselves gagged and bound.

"I managed to get my hands loose," said Tom, "and when nobody was looking scribbled the note to you, Ruth. I had to wait until they had turned their backs for a minute, and then I chucked the note wrapped in a stone I found on the cabin floor as far out of the door as I could. It must have landed pretty far down the ravine and it was just luck that any one found it."

Every one was hilarious, especially the cameramen, who insisted on having a special feast that night at Knockout Point, for which they would stand treat.

"Anything up to a million dollars," cried Bert Traymore, slapping Tom on the back. "That's the way I feel to-night!"

"Glad to get your films back?" Tom asked a little later, as he stood close to Ruth, smiling at the merry scene. "Just a little?"

"And how about getting you back?" asked Ruth, her eyes full of gratitude as she lifted them to Tom. "You took such risks, Tom—you and Chess. I am so thankful we got to the cabin—in time!

"And Snow Mountain," she added softly, after a short pause filled with pleasant thoughts, "*is* lucky, after all!"

Some time had passed since that dramatic scene

in the tumble-down cabin near Knockout Point—time enough to permit Ruth and her company to accomplish the return journey through the wonderful country of blue glaciers and midnight sun back to Seattle and from there by the more prosaic overland route to New York.

They came triumphantly, bearing with them the completed film version of "The Girl of Gold."

Bloomberg had been taken to a hospital at Dawson City, there to await trial for theft when he had sufficiently recovered from his wound. Charlie Reid and Joe Rumph were also under restraint, to be tried as his confederates.

"Didn't I tell you we could beat the whole pack of them?" Tom said once, when the company were nearing New York. "Neither Bloomberg nor Charlie Reid will bother you for some time to come."

"Which," Ruth answered with a sigh of utter content, "is a tremendous comfort to me, Tommy-boy!"

Mr. Hammond was on hand in New York to greet Ruth with hearty enthusiasm and congratulations.

"Wait till you see the film before you praise me too much," Ruth warned him, laughing.

"We'll arrange for a special view at once," Mr. Hammond told her. "But meanwhile, Miss

Ruth Fielding, if *you* say the film is good, I am quite willing to take your word."

Within a few days after their return to New York, Ruth and Tom and some members of their company, together with Helen and Chess, found themselves assembled in the projection room for a private view of "The Girl of Gold."

Mr. Hammond was there, of course, and the same group of men who had first met Ruth in his office, including Jim McCarty and the dubious Raymond Howell. Ruth had descried the author of the book, too, who came in late just as the lights went down. No wonder the hand of the young director was cold as she slipped it into Helen's.

"Don't be nervous, honey," said the latter, with a warm squeeze of the hand. "As our friend, Mary Chase, would say, 'you have no call to be!' "

"I had a letter from Mary to-day," Ruth answered. "She says the men that Mr. Knowles and Layton Boardman set to working the mine have found it richer in gold than they originally supposed. She is coming on with Ellen as soon as she can leave the mine——"

"And then Mary and your handsome actor will be married," concluded Helen happily. "What a darling little romance we stumbled into, Ruth Fielding!"

"Hush!" said Ruth, pressing her fingers. "It has started!"

When the lights went up again Ruth was surrounded by an enthusiastic group of actors, directors and friends.

Mr. Hammond pushed his way through them and held out his hand.

"The best you have ever done, Ruth Fielding!" he said. "You have convinced even the most skeptical. I can't," with a ring of true emotion in his voice, "ever thank you enough."

"Your enthusiasm is all the thanks I want," cried Ruth, eyes shining.

But when the author of the book himself found his way to Ruth and told her that he would not have a scene, a gesture, changed, it seemed to Ruth that her cup of happiness was full.

It was a long, long time before Tom could separate her from the group of her ardent admirers and say a word alone to her.

"It was great, Ruth," he told her, with enthusiasm. "You've done what no other person in this room could do!"

"With your help, Tom," the girl reminded him gently. "The picture would have been ruined, you know, if you—and Chess—had not recovered the stolen films."

Her glance chanced to rest upon Chess and Helen. Under cover of the general excitement

the two were holding hands like a couple of children. They were quite patently absorbed in each other.

Ruth laughed as a whimsical recollection crossed her mind.

"I thought Chess was going to the Yukon on business!" she said. "To me the business end of it seemed conspicuous by its absence!"

Tom grinned.

"Chess believes in never letting business interfere with pleasure," he said. "Anyway, we all had a good time," looking down at her. "Didn't we?"

"Yes," said Ruth, rousing herself from a dreamy musing. "We did, Tom. But the ending is the best of all!"

THE END

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